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JANUARY
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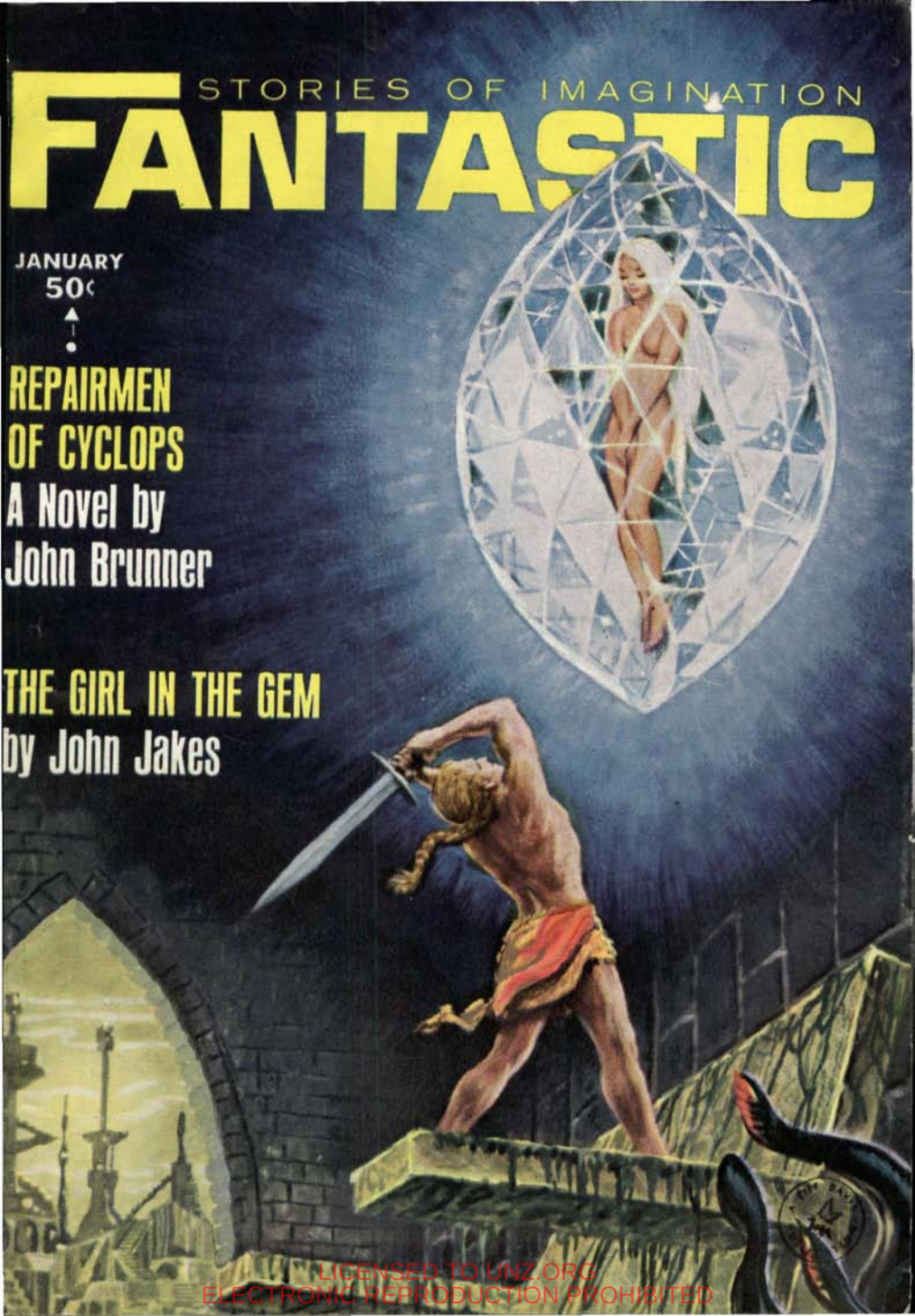
A Novel by
John Brunner

THE GIRL IN THE GEM
by John Jakes



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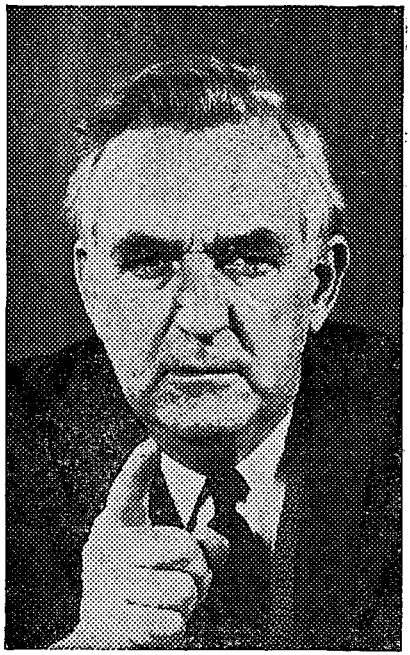

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STORIES OF IMAGINATION

FANTASTIC

JANUARY 1965
Volume 14 Number 1

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF

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SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE: All subscription correspondence should be addressed to FANTASTIC, Circulation Department, Portland Place, Boulder, Colorado 80301. Please allow at least six weeks for change of address. Include your old address, as well as new—enclosing if possible an address label from a recent issue.

EDITORIAL CONTRIBUTIONS must be accompanied by return postage and will be handled with reasonable care; however publisher assumes no responsibility for return or safety of art work, photographs or manuscripts.

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BRAK, as you will notice on page 6 of this issue, is up to his brawny sinews in trouble again. And the question for today, fen, is why the adventures of Brak the Barbarian are always so fascinating—at least to us. After all—and even author John Jakes would not demur too violently at this—Brak is not a three-dimensional character. We know what he is going to do, we know to a degree the twists and turns of plot that await us, and we know that Brak will win. If only because he must eventually get to Khurdisan.

We got to musing on these points after reading, with many a pleasurable quiver, two more Brak stories which we recently added to our inventory. And we thought that the pleasure—or part of it, anyway—lies in that very sense of foreknowledge, in the sense of being "at home." There is something about a Brak story much like a Bach fugue (if the Bach fans will forgive us)—a feeling of completion as the variations on theme come to their predestined resolution.

Then, just as we were congratulating ourselves on Brak, we got a letter from reader Carrington Dixon, Jr., of Garland, Texas, from which we quote the following:

"I think part of the problem with these stories lies with Brak himself. Although you refer to him as "Brak the Barbarian", he is *not* a barbarian in the sense that Howard's Conan and Leiber's Fafhrd are barbarians. These latter are more barbaric than Brak in many ways. They both relish liquor and women and are not above unlawfully appropriating private property. Brak, on the other hand, has little interest in liquor or women and seems to exist, like many comic book heroes, without apparent source of income, lawful or otherwise. Conan and Fafhrd depend more on their thews than on their brains to rescue them from the dangers that confront them. Brak, however, seems as able to think his way out of danger as to fight his way out. Brak seems to me to be a civilized adventurer in the clothes of a barbarian, while Conan remains a barbarian

(*Continued on page 130*)

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THE GIRL IN THE GEM

By JOHN JAKES

A trap . . . a beautiful princess . . . an evil tower raised from the sea . . . a sorcerer . . . a hellish monster . . . treachery . . . bravery . . . It all adds up to another adventure of Brak the Barbarian.

THE yellow-headed barbarian had been sleeping but a short and fitful time when the sinister troop of dwarfs stole down upon him.

The shutters of the inn's large window creaked open. A bulbous, misshapen head stood out against the stars in the opening. Another appeared, a third.

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Illustrator EMSH

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Faint monkey-like footfalls scurried over the rooftiles. A half dozen little bodies leaped from the roof to the yard outside the window, a half dozen more, until the starry night sky seemed to rain tiny figures. Dwarf-hands clasped the sill. Then, with a bat-like belling of a silken cloak, the first of them was inside.

Lonesome and weary after riding many days down through the hills to the port beside the purple-foamed sea, Brak the barbarian had feasted heavily at the empty inn. He'd squandered his last few dinshas for wine, and the wine had taken its toll. He sprawled full length atop a trestle table now, stirring and muttering in haunted sleep as, on tiny feet, the dwarfs came jumping through the window and scurrying through the stealthily-opened door.

Brak's single long yellow braid and one brawny arm hung down off the table. Just below his outstretched fingers, an empty wine goblet lay on its side. His gigantic chest heaved up and down as he breathed raggedly. He was wide-shouldered, and naked save for a garment of lion's hide about his hips. A great broadsword scabbard gleamed beside his mighty leg.

The dwarfs gathered about the table like mourners at a bier. The leader of the group leaned down. He grasped the fallen wine goblet. With a little leap, he hurled it up against the rafters.

"He wakes," the leader squeaked. "Knives out!"

The winecup fell back to the floor, clanking. Brak sat up. He rubbed his eyes. Then pit-fear cold and harrowing, clutched his bowels.

The dwarfs caught the table edge and used it to vault up. With a great roar of rage, Brak tried to throw off the little cloaked figure landing hard on his chest. By the starglare coming through the window, he saw a flicker of silver-white metal. Wildly he twisted his head to the the side. A knife in a tiny fist chunked into the wood next to his ear.

More of the dwarfs swarmed upon him. Brak gathered his strength, gave one huge heave. Tiny bodies flew.

Brak leaped off the trestle table. All around his legs, the air whispered as dwarf hands whipped knives back and forth. He slid the mighty broadsword free of its sheath, raised it over his head with both hands on the haft.

Then something stayed him. The dwarfs chittered softly, screeched unintelligibly.

But not once did a blade-point prick his skin. It was as though they deliberately intended to miss.

"Stand away!" Brak bellowed.

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"I warn you—stand away or I'll hack you up."

THIS shout was the big barbarian's concession to the guilt he suddenly felt at the prospect of having to bring the broadsword down upon men so much smaller than he. It seemed unfair, almost. The dwarfs screeched devilishly, and their brandished daggers still flashed. But no steel touched his skin.

Brak wondered whether he was still asleep and prisoned in a nightmare. "The window!" one of the dwarfs chirruped.

He pivoted on a miniature heel, vaulted up into the shutter-frame, crook-backed against the stars.

"Leave him!"

And, like insects or plague-rats, the dwarfs began an exodus as swift as their arrival.

Rubbing his eyes, Brak rushed to the door, then into the yard. Already the dwarf company, a dozen, two dozen, was up and away over the rooftiles, to vanish down the other side. The inn building backed against a high wall overlooking a sour street. Out there, Brak heard footfalls die away.

His pony tethered in the yard's corner stamped and blew. "A light," Brak muttered. "Where in the name of Shaitan is a lanthorn?"

He blundered noisily back inside the inn. From above-stairs a voice cried, "What's going on down there? Must you make all that racket, outlander?"

"Haul yourself off your pallet, landlord, and come down here," Brak shouted.

He located a dark-lantern beside a great hogshead resting on logs. By the time he had struck sparks and blown the lantern alight, the oafish, porcine landlord in his nightrobe appeared.

"I heard a commotion," the landlord said testily. "More looters? Aye, we've had nothing but riot and rapine in the streets for a fortnight, ever since the earth shook and Great Tyros rose from beneath the waves again offshore." The landlord bent over. "What mice-tracks are these?" He pointed to the traces of tiny foot-marks left on the dirt floor.

"A pack of little assassins swarmed in on me," Brak said. "Why, the gods only know."

"Little assassins?"

"Dwarf-men."

The landlord turned red. "You're still drunk. Swallow your tongue for blasphemy."

Not understanding the remark, Brak growled, "'Tis true. There was a pack of them, carrying knives they somehow did not want to use." Quickly Brak told the tale.

The landlord's face showed mixed horror and revulsion. "Do you want to be hung up by your

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heels? Keep that drunken vision to yourself, or you'll wish you'd never ridden into this city."

Now Brak was growing angry. "Do you deny the evidence of those tracks?"

The landlord gazed at the rafters. "I see nothing, stranger."

"In the name of all the devils —!" Brak shouted, rushing forward to seize the man.

The landlord darted back, bawled, "Outlander, there are no dwarfs in the port kingdom of Lesser Tyros save those tiny men who wear the livery of the king, Archimed of the Wide Sails, the very lord who lies ill with the fatal fever in the palace. Already the black crepes are hung from monuments and eaves in preparation for his passing. When disaster and mourning have already fallen upon us, surely you dare not accuse the king's own retainers of prowling the dark to loot."

"The little men are in—your ruler's service?" Brak said, astonished.

"Aye. Repeat, there are no others in Lesser Tyros. Therefore, you'd be wise to say you saw nothing, no matter what you saw."

"Be damned! I saw a troop of tiny devils who—"

"You saw *nothing*, if you wish to live for other sunsets," repeated the landlord, and hurried back to his chambers.

ANGRILY Brak slammed his broadsword back into the scabbard. He stalked outside into the waning starlight.

This cursed kingdom was afflicted with more assorted madnesses than he'd ever encountered anywhere else during his long journy down from the high steppes, the wild lands of the north where he'd been born. Bound to seek his fortune in the warm climes of Khurdisan far southward, Brak had let his pony's hoof lead him through ragged foothills to the dilapidated port named Lesser Tyros.

Days ago, while he was still riding up in those same hills, Brak had felt the very earth tremble. He'd seen rockslides crashing off the peaks. Upon arriving in Lesser Tyros and taking space at the deserted inn, he had been told that the area roundabout had been struck by one of the infrequent earth-shakings which, in years past, had caused the original city of Great Tyros to sink beneath the waves of the purple-foamed sea. This latest cataclysm had re-twisted the sea bottom somehow. As a result, a collection of gleaming green-and-purple spires and buildings now thrust upward in plain sight above the water offshore. Brak himself had seen the slime-festooned towers at sundown, from the top of one of the hills upon which Lesser Tyros was built.

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The portion of Great Tyros, home of sea-kings and merchant-adventurers, so the landlord said, had simply reappeared a fortnight ago when the earth trembled. A part of an equally long-sunken causeway leading out to the ruins had also become visible again. The natural disaster had triggered a flood of nocturnal lootings and, as a cap to all the other woes of the area, the ruler, Archimed of the Wide Sails' had been stricken ill by the kingly plague a few days later. Palace seers foresaw his death quite soon.

Pondering all these strange circumstances, Brak did not for a moment hear the jingle of traces and clatter of armor in the street outside the wall. As he glanced up, the gates were thrust open. Officers wearing breast plates of beaten brass and carrying pikes and lanterns swarmed through the yard.

Several rushed inside the inn, re-appeared carrying a coarse clothwork bag which they immediately opened.

"Here, commander," a soldier called. "'Twas carelessly hid under the trestle table." A fist dug into the bag, drew out a platter which gleamed gold. Then came a gem-studded cup and another platter.

Dim suspicions whirled in Brak's head. He dropped his hand to his broadsword. The commander of the force turned, came stalking back, pointed at him.

"Hold that one. From the looks of him, he's a foreigner. He did not even bother to hide his spoil."

Quickly a ring of pikes formed, sharp and gleaming, around the barbarian. The commander approached closer.

"Tonight the palace storehouses were desecrated by a thief," he said. "And it now appears we have found that thief. Better you'd taken your loot and ridden out, you simpleton. Because now you face punishment. Take his arms and bring him along!"

The mission of the dwarf-pack made a kind of warped sense at last. "This is mummery!" Brak shouted. "That sack is none of mine. It was planted there by a flock of little men who—"

"Shut the liar's mouth and fetch him," the commander cut in. A pike-butt slammed Brak in the side of the head.

Snarling, the big barbarian reeled back. He whipped out his broadsword. His face was savage. The single long yellow braid of his hair swung back and forth as he crouched to fight.

A soldier darted in from the left. Brak understood now why the dwarfs had not atttacked. That was not their mission. In a rage, he thrust his right arm out, the broadsword-point racing for the charging soldier's throat.

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Against the back of his skull, a pike-butt hammered. Another, another, another.

Its killing stroke undelivered, the broadsword dropped from Brak's hand. He spun, cursing, flailing. There were too many of them. He keeled over.

Brak was trussed with cording. He was thrown across the back of a horse. From this undignified and painful position, he saw the commander of the soldier troop pass a purse to the oafish landlord. The latter had appeared in the shadows of the inn door, and smiled smugly.

So that was how it was done, Brak thought grimly as the troop started through the dark, hilly streets, hoofs clattering, torches flaring. The innkeeper kept a lookout for a likely victim, and then sent word to the palace.

But why did the palace need a victim at all?

And what kind of kings ruled Lesser Tyros that they should resort to such trickery?

Brak did not know. He only knew that his trouble was dire, and his broadsword gone.

AS the horses clopped along the hilly streets, Brak several times glimpsed the newly-risen spires of Great Tyros gleaming far out at the end of the half-sunken causeway. Presently palace walls shut out the view.

The palace of Lesser Tyros was a huge collection of stone buildings fronting on the harbor, which was filled with rotting, sagging merchant galleys that gave testimony to the kingdom's declining maritime status. Brak was carried in through a huge courtyard where mourning banners already fluttered. He was dumped unceremoniously on his feet in a vast, high-vaulted hall. Beyond its windows the spires of Great Tyros were visible again, glowing eerily in the starshine.

The soldiers unfastened the cording. Brak stood in a docile manner, determined to await developments. A gong beat somewhere. The soldiers retreated. Huge doors closed. The shrill soprano keening of female mourners rose up in a ritual song, echoing as though the music sounded and re-sounded through many corridors.

From behind a filigreed screen a girl appeared. She was fragile as porcelain, alone and unarmed.

But she walked with head held high. Her gown was cut of the rich purple cloth of Tyros which Brak had seen in marketplaces far away. Upon her black-raven hair was a circlet of gold decorated with peculiar zodiacal symbols. She was young, full-bodied, imperious, with wave-green eyes. She glanced at Brak's shoulders, the savage cast of his features, his long braid, his lion-hide garment. She smiled.

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"Have they given you back your sword?"

"Given me—?" Brak gaped. "No, lady. If they do, I'll cut a throat or two, I vow."

The girl laughed. She settled on a divan, indicated a tall amphora. "Please. Drink some wine to calm your rage. We had no choice but to send the palace dwarfs to plant a sack of household plate and thus cause you to be arrested as a criminal. But there is no need for us to quarrel now, or grow ugly with one another, so long as you fully understand your situation. For, you see, the crime of which you're accused is punishable by heel-hanging, your head over live coals, until you simmer or strangle to death. Yet there is another way. Please. Have some wine."

On the point of erupting with anger, Brak laughed. The wench had a certain audacity.

He stalked over, picked up the amphora, drank without bothering with goblets. He swiped his forearm across his mouth. "My name is Brak. As long as you've arranged my fate so neatly, at least do me the honor of telling me yours."

"Marjana," she said. "It is my father Archimed of the Wide Sails who lies dying. I will succeed him when his illness has run its course."

"You—" Brak gestured. "You will rule this kingdom?"

"Presently, yes. For that task, I need help. The help of my younger sister. One woman cannot begin to control this unruly realm of rogues and sea-rovers. That is why I must send you where no man of this household has courage to go—or, indeed, I fear, the strength. You must go to the Sea-Stone. You must bring back my younger sister Mardela, if truly she still lives, so that she may sit beside me and help me rule."

Brak scowled. "What is this Sea-Stone of which you speak?"

"A great gem blue as the deeps. It once burned in a place of honor above the throne of my father's grandsires, the kings who ruled Great Tyros."

"Where is this fabulous stone?"

Slowly Marjana raised her hand. Gracefully she pointed.

"Out there."

BRAK followed the tip of her finger. His brows knotted together. For she had indicated one of the open window embrasures high above the dilapidated hulls in the harbor, and she was pointing to the beslimed, strangely phosphorescent towers of Great Tyros that rose from beneath the purplish lapping waves.

Before Brak could speak, Marjana continued:

"When I was younger, there was a warlock in my father's

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court who intrigued behind his back. When my father discovered this, he ordered him punished. Executed. Before this could happen, the warlock burned sacred powders and drew diagrams upon the floor of his apartment. My younger sister Mardela vanished. Before he died under excruciating torture, the warlock said he had imprisoned Mardela in endless sleep within the Sea-Stone, in the palace of Great Tyros which had long before sunk beneath the waves.

"Only a fortnight ago, as you have doubtless heard, the land in these parts heaved and shook again. The chronicles say such a cataclysm sank Great Tyros long ago. Now the towers thrust up once more. Or a part of them, anyway. So if Mardela is truly prisoned within the Sea-Stone out there, neither living nor dead these many years, it requires but the hack of a great sword to smash the stone and loose her."

"Send your own men," Brak snarled.

She shook her head. "Great Tyros is a haunted place. Even offered fabulous rewards, or faced with threats of death, the soldiers will not go. We have been searching for a strong man who would. It can be no more than an hour's journey, out and back. If Mardela is not within the stone —if the warlock lied—no harm is done. But if she sleeps in the gem —she did indeed vanish completely when the warlock cast his spell—then I want her beside me, to help me rule when my father breathes his last. If you will go, I will pay a purse of one hundred dinshas. If you refuse, then the punishment for the crime of which you are accused will be carried out before the sun has set again."

Brak gnawed his lip, rumbled, "I should be flattered by your faith in me. I do not think I am."

Marjana shrugged. "Be that as it may, the choice is clear." For an instant her eyes flickered with a warmth that set Brak's backbone tingling. "And I can offer other rewards, Brak."

"That is evident." He paused. "Very well. I will strike the bargain."

Now Marjana smiled a little, her lips shining in the torchflare. "So quickly decided?"

Brak shrugged. "My purse is empty. A hundred dinshas will speed me nicely on my way to the lands of Khurdisan to the south if I succeed. Should I refuse you, then I will never know what fortune has stored up for me over the horizon, now will I?"

"That is true. You will die heelhung, a common criminal."

"At least your forcing is in the open."

Now Marjana rose, crossed to him in a swirl of purple gar-

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ments. "I will be more than kind to you when you return, barbarian, as I would be more than cruel if you refused. I loved my younger sister dearly. If it can be done, I wish to have her restored to me."

Suppressing a certain grudging admiration for the girl's strength, Brak said, "Give me an ample meal, and wine, and a few hours rest. It has been a long night, Princess Marjana, full of twists and turns."

Marjana reached up, touched his cheek. "There is yet another peril."

"Surely not, after so many already unveiled."

"The Hellarms," she said.

Unaccountably, Brak's spine crawled. "What are they?"

"A myth, perhaps, but fisherfolk maintain they have seen them—or it. A great black beast with many arms like whips. It swims among the sunken towers. It is said to be ten times bigger than a man." Mockingly she added, "Are you afraid?"

The Hellarms. The name rang in Brak's brain like some sinister chord. *The Hellarms*.

"I would be a fool not to be. But I have faced the demons of this world before."

"Then take this." Marjana drew from her girdle a scarf of a particularly dark wine-colored silk, marbled and mottled, with a tiny stain of white at one corner. "My own scarlet scarf, as a token of my wish for your success." And she tied the silk around the bosses of his empty broadsword-scabbard.

With the commission settled upon, she rose on tiptoe to press his mouth warmly, even wantonly, with hers.

Holding her by the shoulders, Brak chuckled. He did not really know whether to damn her for a conniving sly fox, or admire her for her frank use of her power. Rulers were a strange breed. And certainly the world through which he travelled was full of strange rulers of every stamp. If she wanted her younger sister returned, and would pay a hundred dinshas, he was a fool not to try, especially considering the alternative.

As Marjana summoned her dwarfs with a clap of her hands, Brak found his gaze drawn out the window to the slimed spires beginning to gleam brighter in false dawn. Was it all a sea-sunken dream, the Sea-Stone where the younger princess was prisoned, and the Hellarms floating in the deep? He would learn soon enough.

"This way, this way, mighty lord," one of the dwarfs chittered, ushering Brak out. Shaking his head in obvious puzzlement, the big barbarian went loping away to one of the palace apartments.

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AT moonrise the next night, Marjana and two of her dwarfs led Brak down and down through labrynthine passages to a nail-studded door deep within the palace. Swung inward, the door revealed the purple-brakish water of the harbor a short distance below. A punt bumped against the foundation stones.

Without a word, Brak accepted his broadsword from one of the dwarfs.

"Come back safely with Mardela and the sword will never leave your side again," Marjana called as Brak clambered down into the punt. He undid the painter and used the pole to push off.

Lights gleamed in the towers of Lesser Tyros on the mainland. But the spires of Great Tyros lying beyond the rotting hulls among which Brak poled were dark. The night wind was piercing, the sea a wide curving gleam of silver-darkness. The air smelled of salt-spray.

Brak stood in the punt with his great legs braced apart, poling vigorously. From his scabbard flutter Marjana's wine-hued scarf. Presently he left the last of the anchored merchantmen behind. The punt moved onto the empty waters toward the re-risen causeway whose sheared-off end reared ahead.

The nearer Brak approached, the taller loomed the intricately fluted spires of the cluster of buildings thrust up from the sea. The punt bumped against the crumbled causeway. Brak tied up, wedging the painter in a crack in one of the causeway blocks. He clambered up on the slippery stones, stared ahead.

Far at the causeway's end, a huge, black arch yawned. Carrying a length of resinous wood in one hand, the other hand on his broadsword-haft, Brak loped toward it, a tiny figure beneath the shadowed immensity of the towers festooned with great green loops of sea-fungus. The closer Brak came to the buildings, the stronger grew the stench of weedy wetness.

As he drew near the looming arch, Brak paused. He struck sparks, finally got the torch going in the gusty air. The wind whined, sang, keened as he stepped through the arch, which was actually an opening in what must have once been a city wall.

He walked across a wide, square-like space paved with gigantic marble blocks butted together crookedly and tilted at odd angles. Some of the blocks had crumbled away altogether. In these openings, the purplish water rose up, forming pools. Brak suspected that a vast network of underwater canals ran below the shaky structures towering to the moon.

Ahead, a mammoth, imposing and many-turreted edifice rose.

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Broad steps led up to its entrance. Just as Brak was climbing these steps, a strange, flitting radiance caught his attention.

He whirled. The light winked and vanished, down in one of the pools left by missing paving stones.

Brak's flesh crawled. For one dreadful instant, he had imagined that, down in the pool, a great yellow-blotchy eye of inhuman size had looked up at him.

BRAK stopped at the top of the steps, cursed low. The wind, soughing around building corners, had blown out his torch. He struggled to kindle fresh sparks. The air was too damp. Swallowing, he cast the half-burned wood aside. He snaked out his broadsword with a faint whisper of iron on iron.

He passed between two great pillars, blinked. Ahead, there was a faint pearl-blue glow. Careful of each step, Brak moved into the palace of blackness toward that narrow, vertical, flame-like blueness.

Abruptly he banged against damp, sea-cold metal. He had blundered into great doors, he discovered. The bluish radiance washed through the narrow vertical opening between them. Brak slid his sword away, braced his palms on the doors, thrust. He gasped with exertion. The doors, ponderous metal, gave but little.

He bent his back. The huge muscles in his shoulders writhed and corded. All at once the right-hand door gave all the way. Brak stumbled forward into a burst of blue light.

He caught himself just in time to keep from falling over a stone lip into water below.

Panting from exertion, Brak raised his head. He was in a gigantic chamber whose walls were decorated with fantastically colored friezes depicting the mighty vessels of the sailor-kings of Great Tyros. The pool below, in which Brak's image rippled and reflected blue, was in actuality the all-but-disintegrated sunken central floor of a throne room. Only a few paving-blocks could be glimpsed down in the purplish depths. The bluish radiance hurt Brak's eyes. Despite this, he raised his head. He goggled at the sight on the far side of the chamber.

A massive golden carved throne-chair sat tilted on a cocked block of flooring. Above it, embedded in the stone wall and five times as high as Brak was tall, shone the Sea-Stone.

It was an immense transparent gem of a thousand or more facets, deep and cool-blue as a peaceful ocean. And within it was a human figure. The figure of a young girl without clothing, perfectly preserved.

Her head was bowed forward

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as though she slept. Her hands were folded over the lower part of her body, thereby also concealing her bosom. Her hair was white as silver as she hung in the crystalline-blue prison high over Brak's head.

"True, then," he whispered. "Mardela in the Sea-Stone."

He felt encouraged, even though the girl whose hair must have turned white looked lifeless behind her blue-walled catacomb. Quickly Brak surveyed the chamber.

He could not cross the sunken floor because it did not exist. But he could make his way around the chamber on the narrow rim on which he now stood. He wanted to make quick work of the job if possible. The shadows in the chamber, coupled with the gem's blue light which must have shone for centuries in unearthly radiance under the sea, somehow unnerved him.

Being careful of his footing, he began to pad around the stone rim of the chamber. Half way down the long side, he started. He whipped his head to the right.

The surface of the water in the center of the chamber rippled, moiled, erupted a string of bubbles. Deep, deep below, there was a yellow flash, swiftly gone.

Brak yanked out his sword. He raced around toward the crazy-tilted throne chair. Had he seen the Hellarms? Was it the same eye which had watched him outside the once-sunken city? Were there passages between the foundations through which a—*thing*—could swim and await the coming of its prey?

STILL as death, the white-haired girl hung up there inside the gem. Brak calculated swiftly. He climbed up on the arms of the golden throne. The gem's radiance was so bright it nearly blinded him. He closed both hands on the broadsword hilt. Reaching high, he uttered a silent, terse prayer to the unknown gods, and brought the broadsword blade whistling forward with all the power of his mighty body.

The impact nearly knocked him from his perch. Thinking he had failed, he drew his sword back for another blow. Suddenly a star-shaped crack appeared in a lower facet of the gem.

Like a spiderwebbing of ice, the crack shot outward, became many cracks, and, with a thunderous smash and clatter, the Sea-Stone fell into great sharp pieces that rained down.

Brak instinctively ducked his head. He was battered off the chair by one of the huge fragments whose sharp edge ripped open his left shoulder. A moment later he lay on his back, blood sliming his biceps, dazed.

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He lurched up. Fear quickened his breathing. The mammoth oval in the wall into which the Sea-Stone had been set was empty. Wind whistled through it. All around, like a meadow of crystal, great cruel-cornered bits of the Sea-Stone gleamed. Each fragment radiated blue light. The throne chamber had become a patchwork of intersecting, dazzling beams and glitters.

Brak stumbled forward, cut his ankle on a shard lying in his path. Another big piece teetering on the stone ledge fell off, plopped and sank into the chamber's watery center. Behind still another fallen section of the gem, a section as wide as Brak was tall, a strand of silver hair lay damply.

Certain the fall had killed her if she was not already dead, Brak rushed around the piece of stone. He choked back an exclamation of surprise.

The girl Mardela lay on her side, her silver hair around her like a shimmering garment. A bit of the stone had cut into her calf. From the short, shallow wound, red blood trickled.

Brak reached over, touched the girl's shoulder. She moaned lightly. Brak pressed his lips to her cheek, felt the flesh warming beneath the touch of his mouth. She had slumbered within the Sea-Stone, prisoned there by the warlock's spell. She wasn't dead.

Brak turned her over gently, to pick her up and carry her from the chamber and the ruins of Great Tyros. Doing so, he saw her face clearly for the first time.

Tiny wrinkles radiated from the corners of Mardela's closed, porcelain-lidded eyes. She was not an old woman, but neither was she a young maiden. Brak scowled, grunted under his breath. The stink of treachery was in his nostrils.

Something black, thick, jellyish, as round as his own huge torso, curled around Brak's leg where he crouched. Glancing down, Brak cried out.

A pinkish, sucker-like orifice as wide as his arm was long gleamed and pulsed on the undersurface of the black thing which now began to wrap itself round and round his leg.

The orifice touched his flesh. Brak threw his head back, shrieked in mortal agony as the sucker began to strip the skin from his leg.

Maniacally, Brak hauled his broadsword back. He chopped it downward behind him. There was a sudden noise of erupting, churning water. As his blade cleft the tentacle, the orifice against his leg relaxed. Brak fought free of the slimy black tube twisted around him, staggered to his feet—

As the Hellarms rose from its underwater lair.

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BRAK'S mind threatened to crack at the sight of the monster that came plowing and heaving up from the endless fathoms below the ancient city. The center of its body was a huge, black, obscenely-shimmering pulp-like dome nearly ten times as high as Brak himself. This central dome swayed higher and higher, rising toward the distant ceiling while tentacle after mammoth tentacle emerged from the water, came slithering over the rim of the stone on which Brak stood. Two immense baleful yellow-blotchy eyes, pupilless, flamed in the dome.

The Hellarms seemed to have scores of the whiplike tentacles. One went streaking for Brak's scabbard, swaying in the air just a hand's width from the place where Marjana's wine-colored scarf was knotted. The orifice of the tentacle opened and closed and emitted whistling, sucking noises with an insane frequency not matched by the orifices of the other tentacles which came slithering and crawling toward Brak, to surround him and strip off his skin.

Horror-struck, Brak hacked out at the first tentacle, split it. A gush of foul-smelling tarry liquid spilled over the stones. Another tentacle sailed at his head, whipped past as Brak dodged backwards. He slammed against a big fragment of the Sea-Stone. His spine was cruelly cut by one of its sharp edges.

The attacking tentacle swept over Brak's head. The end curled back toward the lower center of the dome in which yawned a huge, rotting-pink mouth opening. But the tentacle had no human gobbet to drop into the central mouth, which closed suddenly. All at once the orifices in the tentacles began to whistle and make sucking sounds at a faster rate, as though the monster were angered.

Still the tentacle swaying near Brak's scabbard did not fasten. It wavered back and forth near the knotted scarf and, through his pain and fright, Brak at last understood why Marjana had given him the bit of silk. The deephued dye was a human dye which drew the Hellarms. It was blood.

He cursed himself for a fool for not guessing it. The marbled swirls of the color should have made it apparent, and also the whitish corner, which was not a stain, but a place where the blood had not seeped and colored.

It was too late for such self-cursing. Brak had trouble enough staying on his feet, hacking madly at this tentacle, then that one. The Hellarms thrashed and writhed and threw up fountaining sprays of water in the sunken center of the chamber. All at once, one of the tentacles caught

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Brak off guard and wrapped round and round his middle.

HE was blinded by blood from his wound, by spray from the pool. He felt the orifice close on his belly, sending hot agonies of pain through his body.

Other tentacles swiped at his head, missed, went curling and sailing back in dumb instinctual response toward the central mouth of the dome. Wildly Brak sliced and hacked at the tentacle around his waist. He sawed back and forth, back and forth, until the blackish fibrous stuff parted, spilling out more of the tarry effluvium.

He peeled the severed end away from his belly, leaped back shaking with pain as the orifice came free. Panting, he stumbled backwards, crouched above the unconscious Princess Mardela while the angered whistlings and sucking of the Hellarms increased, denoting its maddened frustration.

Six tentacles came crawling over the rim of the stone ledge, all sliding toward Brak's body at once. He raised his sword, then lowered it. He sobbed raggedly. To struggle with a puny iron blade was futile. He could not win against the creature.

Long yellow braid dappled with blood and hanging over his shoulder, Brak leaned his head against the cool blue-radiating surface of a gigantic fragment of the Sea-Stone. He gulped air. The tentacles came crawling, slithering, creeping toward his legs—

In the corner of his vision, the bluish radiance of the great chip of Sea-Stone burned. Wildly Brak slammed his broadsword back in the scabbard. He darted behind the huge fragment, which was precariously balanced upon one of its shatter-cut facets. He leaned his shoulder against the hunk of stone which towered twice his height.

Thrusting and bending his huge back, cursing aloud and calling on the nameless gods, he tipped the great chip over with a crash. The tumbling, glittering-blue glass-like piece smashed down atop the out-creeping tentacles.

Instinctively, the tentacle orifices closed. The tentacle-ends turned—and while Brak watched, the six obscenely black tubes together lifted the mighty chunk of Sea-Stone, carried it out high in the air to the central dome and rammed it into the pink-rotting mouth.

The mouth closed.

Then, as the knife-sharp edges of the fragment cut and sliced away at the inside of the monster's maw, new horror began.

Swallowing the instrument of its own destruction, the Hellarms began to writhe, crash about the

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pool even more wildly. Poisonous ichor gushed from its suddenly opened mouth, deep inside which the fragment of Sea-Stone was now lodged, choking and cutting, choking and cutting—

The tentacles one by one slid thrashing back into the pool. The baleful yellow eyes began to pulse and dim, pulse and dim. With its whistling rising higher and higher, until Brak's ears began to ache and throb, the Hellarms sank downward into water darkening with the tarry ichor.

Groggy, hurt, Brak felt dimly that the Hellarms *knew* a human being had slain it with a jagged gem which cut its insides to bits. He felt the Hellarms knew because the baleful yellow eyes pulsed flame-bright an instant before the monster sank.

One last tentacle reached feebly over the rim of the ledge. Brak hacked it off. The Hellarms vanished from sight.

HARDLY remembering the rest of it, Brak the barbarian gathered the still-living Mardela in his arms. He trudged around the rim of the sunken floor. He walked out of the palace and under the arch. Mardela's hair hung silver-damp in the starlight. Brak's eyes were wet with mixed sweat and blood. For a moment he did not glimpse what was waiting for him at the crumbled end of the causeway.

Off to the right, out below the foaming purple waves, there was a will-of-the-wisp flicker of yellow, now bright, now dull. But Brak's gaze fastened straight ahead.

A second punt was tied beside the one he had poled.

A figure stood on the causeway.

A cloak belled from its shoulders, rippled by the wind which blew from behind Brak now. The figure held a bow, fully drawn. The arrowhead shone in the glare of the waning moon.

Suddenly a gust of wind blew back the cowl. Marjana's hair streamed out in the wind.

"No one told me that she was your younger sister," Bark shouted. "No one except you."

"Stand there, barbarian," Marjana cried. "This arrow can travel faster than your legs."

"She's alive," Brak called back, taking a pace forward. His eyes were fastened on that trembling arrow-tip standing far out ahead of the bow's curve. "Alive, and not a young girl, either. Your *older* sister. And therefore heiress to the crown, am I right?"

"As long as she was prisoned in there—" Marjana screamed, "—she was—threat—" The wind blew away some of her words as Brak took another pace forward, another. "—if it turned out—she was alive—someday, someone might—free her—"

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"So you cleverly trapped me as a criminal and set me to learn whether she did truly live," Brak responded in a ragged shout. "Of course you could send no one from your household, because they would have smelled a plot. So you gave me a token of your faith when you sent me. A scarf dyed with the blood whose silent tang you knew the Hellarms would somehow recognize, somehow scent. With that scarf, you gave me the very means by which I'd be slain, and your sister too."

Now, far on his right, Brak noticed a pulsing yellow flash. There must indeed be subterranean canals beneath the thrust-up ruins of Great Tyros. Through them, the Hellarms had come lumbering along in the depths, death-wounded, but chasing to the last its slayer.

BRAK heard a ripple of water, a foaming roar. Something sucked wetly and came slipping across the causeway.

Drawing the bow to full nock, Marjana screamed, "I can kill you before you half reach me. Barbarian, stop!"

Shrieking, she released the arrow. Brak had bent swiftly, dropping Mardela. Running forward, he did not lurch out of the way in time. The arrow plowed through his left thigh. It left a deep, bloody gorge into which the blood from his hacked left

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arm drained and mingled. But the fingers of his right hand were busy ripping at silk.

He raised his hand. Something fluttered, then skated through the air the short distance to Marjana's head, fluttered there, held against her face by the wind blowing from behind Brak.

Too late she recognized what it was, flung away her bow, plucked madly at it—

Just as two slimed-black tentacles of the dying Hellarms slithered along the causeway, scented the silent tang of the blood-dyed scarf, wrapped around Marjana's body.

High against the waning moon she was lifted, shrieking, dying. One of the ghastly orifices completely concealed her head as the Hellarms sank beneath the waves carrying its final victim.

Shambling, weakened, Brak turned around. He lurched back to where Mardela lay. Her silver hair was afire in the luminescence of the night. She was breathing lightly, soundly.

Slowly Brak bent down. He picked her up. He turned his scarlet-streaked back on the evil obscenity of Great Tyros.

Brak the barbarian reached the end of the causeway carrying the rightful queen in his arms. He laid her gently in the punt, cast off, and began to pole back toward the mainland under the light of the stars. THE END

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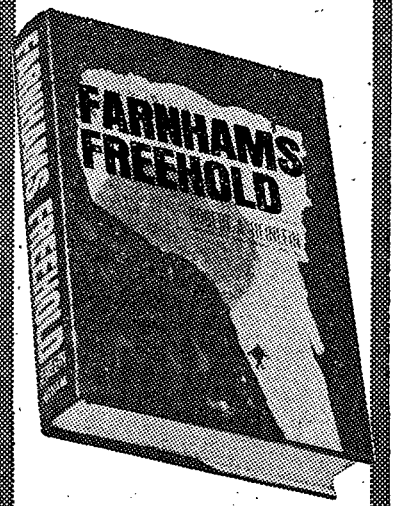

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JOURNAL OF A LEISURED MAN

By BRYCE WALTON

Illustrator SCHELLING

Everyone was lonely . . . but loneliness could be dispelled with a Life-Like pet, or a sibling, or a model, or even an ex-wife. Ex-wives? Ah, that's when things began to get—shall we say, sticky?

First Entry (Undated)

TWO years ago, when I was only 38 years of age, my life stopped having what I was trained to consider a meaningful goal or purpose. I was chief accountant at Greater Animations, Inc., and of course accountants were among the first to be displaced by computors. There won't be a need for my sort again. You see I'm not legally unemployed, and I'm legally unemployable. I'm a certified "retiree." I draw Federal retirement benefits and a monthly company bonus check and am not, therefore, supposed to have gripes. I'm financially secure, fixed to the grave. So I can't be allowed useful, productive work. My status forbids by law my taking jobs from men who have families to support.

I tried to join some planned leisure play group, but I can't bear the idea of just playing stupid games the rest of my life. I never did like to play games.

Then right after I was retired, Elsa, my wife, left me. Oh not that I blame her. When I needed warmth, her support, she left me cold, but she had to do it. She had to avoid contracting a dread disease, the disease of emptiness and boredom, of idleness that disintegrates into a kind of non-existence, a non-involvement with the world.

Later I heard that Elsa had moved in with one of her lovers, one of her so-called "artist" friends. He'd gotten her a job with Greater Animations as an

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artist, in quotes. She had always dabbled in water colors but had no talent. However, anything the automated assemblies can't give the human touch to is now in terrific demand. Anyone, though strictly third-rate, who can satisfy a need for the human touch in manufactured items can about set his own price. Especially with outfits like Greater Animations. The human touch is still needed to give a simulated spark of life and color to lips, eyes, cheeks of animated toys, dolls, puppets and automated animals.

Elsa and her friend are said to be touch-up artists. They paint mouths on things.

I don't blame her for leaving me, finding a productive life with meaning for herself. I stopped having illusions about myself. I never had any creative talent and never will. All I ever had, as they used to say, was "a head for figures."

But I couldn't stay in the company housing units and face former friends and acquaintances. I felt empty and useless, not needed. I caught myself feeling as though the world was going past my door while I just had to sit and watch and might soon not exist.

I found this room in a cheap rooming house across the river, where a vast area is being torn down. Many street-level storekeepers and tenants from old apartments and houses have gone away into the planned leisure tracts, or somewhere. Rows of white X's mark most windows. Whole square miles are to be demolished—in order to build more factories, I hear, to make more toys and games, more complex and clever diversions for the planned leisure consumers. People can't seem to get enough playthings anymore.

I look at television mostly, especially old movies. Drinking takes the edge off of the terror. It is a kind of terror, you know, being useless and alone and still young.

Second Entry (Undated)

I'VE lain here too long, but what else is there for me? I'm wasting away, not physically, that doesn't count, but in other ways. My life has been burning away inside these four walls, this fortress erected around my life and thoughts. I've been occupying my thoughts for hours at a stretch with the slightest details of life in this room. For example with a little spider in a wall crevice. Patterns of faded grease spots and cracked plaster. Odors get stronger, smells people left here. A burned steak, urine, sweat, feet, fried onions, medicines and perfumes. Even a smell I think must have been left by someone dying here. I remind

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myself of the flies which take refuge indoors at the beginning of autumn. I see them now, up there near the ceiling. It's warmer up there. They, too, are waiting.

And out there what is considered one of the greatest cities in the world breathes and lives its life and has no knowledge or feeling of me whatever.

It's getting to be too much. I really should get out of here. Walk somewhere, get some fresh air . . .

Third Entry (Undated)

A VERY disturbing thing happened to me last night. The loneliness of this room was too much, so I went downstairs to ask Mrs. Crane for a pot of tea, she's the landlady. She always politely asks me to sit and talk a while.

Thin autumn rain and wind drummed on walls and windows as I started past the opened double-doors that lead into the parlor. Television was on in there, very low at that late hour. Then I heard the younger Crane boy, Teddy, calling my name. Mr. Alding. Mr. Alding. Over and over, very fast. The little fellow had called to me before but this was strangely different. It got higher-pitched, faster, shriller, like a tape-recorded voice going too fast. I looked into the shadows of the parlor through a jumble of faded furniture. I asked, what do you want, Teddy?

He kept calling my name, faster, shriller. Worried I stepped into the parlor as the older brother, Marc, giggled. Just as I thought it was probably a prank, Teddy came at me from behind a chair, swinging his arms and pumping his fat little legs. Before I knew what was happening, he had jumped at me and I had fallen backward onto the floor. Little Teddy was on my chest clawing at my eyes. I threw him off as Marc ran past me down the hall laughing, and Mrs. Crane ran in from the kitchen at the end of the hall, screaming after Marc. "Get to bed. I'll whip you good. You know I told you not to use Teddy until it got fixed. Didn't I tell you?"

She grabbed up a metal disc and turned a control lever. At closer range I saw it was a remote control switch. Teddy, who had been lying on his back kicking his legs, suddenly went limp. Mrs. Crane looked at me as she nervously lit a cigarette. "Called and called for repairs to pick up Teddy. Told Marc to wait till it's fixed. But he gets lonesome. Has to have a playmate and he's too sensitive to get along with the other kids."

I found the trademark stamped on Teddy's back.

Like-Life

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A famous brand name of Greater Animations Inc. products.

I looked at Mrs. Crane's crudely painted lips mouthing the cigarette. She stared up at me curiously. "You look worse than usual, Mr. Alding. What's wrong?"

I shrugged. I had no intention of letting anyone know that I had been deceived for a year into thinking an automaton was a real live boy. I despised Mrs. Crane for supporting this deception, treating that disgusting toy as if it were her own. But I've since read the directions that come with delivery. ". . . the illusions of being real folks is greatly improved if the entire family joins in the game of make-believe. Accept your child's Like-Life Playmate, make him feel at home. Remember, reality is faith."

"What's wrong, Mr. Alding?"

"Frankly," I said, "I don't approve of those things."

"Well, you played the game straight enough all along."

"Well, I'm only a guest here. And it's entirely your business. But I should prefer a boy to play with real kids, rather than a vicious little dummy."

She bristled. "Marc's therapist recommended a Like-Life Playmate for him. He has trouble playing with kids. Got beaten up, and always was coming home crying. Kids here are mean—dark you know. It isn't their fault, it's social but it's there. And Marc kept coming home and having nightmares."

"Doesn't he still have nightmares?"

"Not so much though. Almost no conflicts or tensions now. It's marvelous for Marc. He really got to believing he has a baby brother. And little Ted is always so nice and permissive. Never argues or disagrees or fights or upsets Marc in any way. He always plays fair and never uses obscene language. Perfect little playmate. Marc never wants to play with anyone else anymore. I don't know what we'll do if they don't hurry and repair Teddy."

I pointed out that little Teddy hadn't been so nice to me.

"Some circuits went bad in him is all. But he's guaranteed!"

I remembered Marc hiding in the shadows laughing when little Teddy came at me, and Marc had the control box then. Something was going wrong all right, but with who, or what? I came back up to my room without saying anything more, even asking for my pot of tea. I had a sudden thirst for whiskey.

It usually helps me sleep, but not last night. I kept thinking of that little playmate. It seemed so strange and evil; I've simply been cut off from things and apparently haven't noticed or heard

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of these advanced toys that others take for granted as ordinary items.

I was also disturbed that these items had been perfected and distributed by my old company. But it isn't really odd that I did not know such things were being produced perhaps even while I was still considered useful there, and not obsolete. A doll in my accounting department was just another doll, a number on a ledger tape. During my years with Greater Animations I'd never had cause to familiarize myself with other departments.

Fourth Entry (Undated)

I'VE had some bad dreams, but maybe that's better than not having any.

Another disturbing incident happened yesterday afternoon. I had to get out of this room, and I finally forced myself from the bed and over to the window. I slid back the blind. The old street was drab with thin cold rain. Water dripped from untended shrubbery; it shone on broken sidewalks, cracked streets and a few stunted weeds flowering in rubble. The sky seemed a bit lighter though so I ventured out.

But the weather soon got worse. A rising wind whirled leaves and rubble past the X'd windows. Low clouds raced up dark alleys. I started across the corner of an area of wasteland where many square blocks of tenements have been torn down. Several kids ran out suddenly ahead of me over flat-topped heaps of bulldozed rubble and thousands of crushed and leveled bricks. They joined a little girl on the edge of a refuse pit who was on her knees pointing down and yelling. "Help her, she can't last longer without a Medic."

A boy in a ragged coat, carrying a black bag, said. "I'm a Medic. I can handle this emergency." And he leapt into the pit just as I ran to the edge and looked down at a pitiable broken body of a girl in a clot of refuse. A frightful gash in her head streamed blood. Her legs twitched. The boy Medic opened his first-aid kit as the others gathered round. It was well-stocked with all sorts of medical equipment. The Medic put on rubber gloves. The girl adjusted a gauze mask over his mouth. Bitter cold wind whined around me as I looked down in horror, not knowing what to do, or rather being too shocked to think for a time. Finally I yelled, "Somebody call an ambulance."

They all looked up at me with disdain. The kid with the masked mouth nodded impatiently. The girl nurse shouted at me. "Our Medic says it must be done at once, or she'll bleed to death."

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The girl held a wad of cotton over the patient's bleeding mouth, her movements stopped. The Medic gave her an injection and bandaged her head, while a tripod was set up from which a plasma bottle or something was suspended with tubes which the Medic inserted into the little arms.

"Not such a hot job," said another boy, sneering.

"You can do better?"

"I couldn't do worse."

"You're all mouth."

"I'll show you!" And the challenger ripped the bandage off. Blood spurted over the kid's face and clothing as they laughed and I ran, sickened, until I found a policeman. I ran with him back to the pit. He looked down. The kids laughed up at us. The policeman started to laugh too. But he frowned at me.

"You never seen a first-aid doll before?" the policeman asked.

"No," I said.

"Where you been hiding?"

But somehow it was hardly less horrible to me as I listened to the kids in the pit. "Finish her off!"

"Sure, she can't live now anyway. Hopeless."

"Don't prolong her suffering."

"Mercy kill her. Mercy kill her." They cut her open.

"I advise you," the policeman said sternly, "to keep yourself better informed on contemporary affairs." Then he went away shaking his head and the kids followed after him, covered with the stains of surgery, and laughing back at me. I climbed down and looked at the brand name on its back.

Like-Life

Later I did remember the ad. About every child learning to be an expert Medic or nurse by actual experience on a Like-Life model injury victim. Very realistic and responsive to all sorts of treatment, both proper and negligent. First-aid kits included. Practice on a Like-Life victim. There was more I remembered. The blood is stainless, washes off easily with plain water, has a pleasant odor and is harmless if taken internally. It also contains a powerful repellant that discourages all insects, including flies. They won't touch it.

Fifth Entry (Undated)

LAST night I went to the liquor store. Coming back, I heard screams from an alley. I saw scuffling figures in there, jumbled shadows that twisted in movement blacker than the surrounding darkness. A pale light burned at the back of some store. The gang of coloreds, all kids, ran out of the alley past me. They ran half a block, then in through the gate adjoining the big building

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with wiremesh windows. It's the *City Hospital Extension. Branch 218. Psychotherapy for Disordered Children.* The gate had obviously been left open for the kids, and it promptly shut and locked after they ran inside.

I went into the alley where they had left a white man hanging by his neck. His face was wet, his extended tongue swollen blue, dripping saliva. The body was still warm and quivering, dangling its toes a few inches off the ground. I turned the figure around to see the trademark stamped on its back. *Like-Life.*

Under that, in smaller letters, was stamped:

Property of: Psychotherapy Branch 218

Sixth Entry (Undated)

HERTZOG first visited me last night, by a deception. I was in bed looking at the Magic Box. There was a knock at seven-thirty, just when the kid from the diner down the street usually brings me some sort of food for the evening. So I said, "come in," but it wasn't the kid from the diner. It was Hertzog, only I did not know it then.

It was just someone in a dark suit, with a tanned assertive face. He had silver temples too, and I hated him a little, though not really, whoever he was, for he was at least 20 years older than I, but was obviously still demanded for productive work. He carried a black attache case with the trademark glowing on the side. *Like-Life.*

Something furry, with black bright eyes, squirmed in his other arm. But I couldn't make out just then what it was over the Tevee shadows. Pets are the rage now, imported from all over the world. More people seem to be accompanied by animals or birds than by other people now. So this might be anything.

I said, "You're in the wrong room."

"Not if you're Alding." It was a virile, aggressive voice. I knew that I had heard it somewhere before. I also knew that I had never seen him before. "I'm Hertzog, from our company, Greater Animations. Its Therapy Clinic sent me actually, to help you."

"Get out," I said, as politely as I could.

"The company feels responsible for you, Alding. You're retired but the Company still feels, always will feel, that you're its child. It will make your years of retirement and leisure happy and fulfilling if you cooperate."

Hertzog came nearer and leaned down. He had bright disturbing eyes. "Our company has been experimenting with therapeutic aid models for some time. An aging man loses a wife he loved dearly, and gets a Like-Life

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duplicate and his suicidal depression dissolves. A dead child's duplicate is introduced to bereaved parents who once again have something to live for. A man obsessed with a lust to murder is given a Like-Life image he has always dreamed of destroying, and he never needs to kill again. A remarkable percentage of cures."

"I don't want anything but for you and the company to leave me alone," I said.

"Here's a gift, little bundle of love for the lonely," he said. "Compliments of the company."

The dog, it was a little dog, jumped and yapped with joy over the bed and onto my chest. It licked me all over the face, in the eyes and ears with its long pink and warm tongue. My heart melted. I've always loved dogs. I held it close, but the Hertzog slid a remote control box from under his coat and turned it off. The dog died on my chest, its tongue still hanging out and dripping but cold as a length of pink plastic. Its eyes turned marble hard and dry. I switched on a lamp so I could read the sales card hanging from its collar.

"A new marvel from *Like-Life*, Greater Animations, Inc., makers of Like-Life toys, tanks, guns, dolls, playmates, and automatons of stunning variety and adaptability.

Meet Hugo, the joy-bringing pup. Never growls, never scratches, or messes floors, or gets hungry or lost. Never bites or strays from home. Always comes when called. Always wags replaceable tail, licks face, grins, whines. Never fails to show unconditional love to its master—*and only to its master*. Never an ill-temper, can only give love, $9.90 COD."

DISGUSTED, I threw it across the room. I started to tell Hertzog off, but then he said,

"Our model of your wife will be far more convincing."

"I heard you say my wife?"

"We promise something even you can't distinguish from the real thing, Alding. You may know better intellectually, but the primitive emotional Gestalt —it can't tell the difference and reacts as if it's the real item. It's a scientific rule of thumb, Alding. That a difference that makes no difference is no difference."

"I hope she's happy," I said. "I still love her, and—"

Not according to my records at the company Clinic. Hertzog explained about that. Hertzog, quoting the clinic reports made on me during that hard time of my retirement, said it wasn't the company or getting retired that had made me bitter. I know that greater efficiency is necessary for greater production and that computors are more efficient. I should

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know I couldn't hate the company for acting in the interests of the greater good for the greatest number. I didn't really hate the idea of a long life of games, fun and organized leisure. That was just a coverup for what I really hated—

Elsa. The woman who had humiliated me and denied me my rights. I hated her so much that I was in this room slowly killing myself because I couldn't kill her, because I couldn't get even.

But wasn't she really the one that had poisoned my life?

When he stopped talking I saw that I had been beating the bed with my fists.

He was very convincing after that. He set up a small projector and demonstrated some fantastically genuine female automatons in action. He said they'd had a complete file on Elsa, and that the duplication would be remarkable. I began to imagine the possibilities.

Then he took my—I started to say "my wife's eye" when of course I mean the synthetic sample for my inspection that he took out of the attache case. What a shocking likeness! The exact purplish-black brilliance of Elsa's eyes. Her expression too—that amused contempt she used to reserve just for me.

I couldn't hide my reaction. Hertzog who had been watching me closely, smiled and held the thing closer, almost under my nose. "Here, Alding. You must feel it—the texture."

I dropped it at once. It sounded as genuine as it looked and felt. It made a soft, dull plop on the table, rolled a few inches then looked up at me scornfully. It seemed so real that her whole face began to form around the eye. Black hair, the curling nose. Then her mouth—always sensual so that her contemptuous smile was even more condemning of my supposed inadequacy. I turned to the bureau after jumping out of bed, and wiped at my fingers. The thing had left a wet trail like a snail's across the bedtable. A moist film clung to my thumb and forefinger. My hands were unsteady, a fact I concealed from Hertzog. I didn't want him to notice the effectiveness of the thing, for he hadn't quoted a price on the complete model.

He picked the sample up and dropped it back into the case. "Now you must see the exciting potentialities of having her entire body up here to do with just as you please."

I turned toward the window to hide my expression. Gray rain fell and I thought of the damp leaves gathering out there against the walls. I asked him about the financial arrangements.

Hertzog put on his topcoat, while replying. "Our company is not interested just yet in profits

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on this rather new item, but in testing its value as a therapeutic tool. So you get the model at cost if you agree to fill out a questionnaire concerning your experiences with it."

The cost he quoted was extremely cheap. He then said I could have it within a few days but he wasn't sure how many. That was fair enough. He shook my hand, opened the door and gave me a warm smile.

"You won't be disappointed, Alding. So far, on our other tests, it's worked as a very effective emotional cathartic, especially with repressed hostility cases."

"I don't care about that," I said. "I only want to get even."

"You will." And Hertzog went out and closed the door.

Seventh Entry (Undated)

THIS damn waiting for delivery. I don't know how many days. I've been drinking too much again. I should get out of this dinky room but the weather's a bad gray again. Anyway I might get a call from Hertzog. I don't want to miss the delivery. I'd better stay and watch television . . .

I keep seeing the eye, or rather Elsa's eyes. The contempt and ridicule sometimes changes to something else. Perhaps a look of reproach, as though they had seen me commit some inexpiable sin of which I have no knowledge. Sometimes they are frightening magic eyes with an expression of anxiety and wonder, of promise and menace.

I hardly notice the room now. I wait actually shivering sometimes with excitement for the delivery of the finished model. I see nothing now but her eyes. Her image takes form on the bed. I shiver in mingled fear and joy such as I used to feel in one of those frightening but delicious dreams.

Even the thought of some copy of her—that doesn't matter—it arouses an intense desire. Her slender body with that dress that was my favorite—that excited me the most. Black, thin, that clung to her all over as if she were wet. I can already feel the warmth of her, smell the odors of dampness from her black hair. I can't wait to thrust my hand into her hair. It always felt damp and warm.

Will her mouth still taste acrid and bitter?

It won't matter. It isn't really Elsa who will be sent to me. I must remind myself, be realistic. She'll look just like Elsa, so desirable. But she won't be Elsa. She won't be cold and rejecting. She'll be whatever I want her to be. I'm buying the model, and she is guaranteed to do whatever I want, however and whenever I want it.

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Eighth Entry (Undated)

IT DIDN'T occur to me that she might have been delivered by someone—someone who wasn't visible to me. I mean there was a knock, her familiar knock. And when I opened the door Elsa stood there alone. Someone must have brought her at least to the stairs, but I didn't see anyone.

I had lit a small lamp on the other side of the room. I purposefully wanted a dim light, I think, wanting to flatter whatever the model was, make it seem more real. But I didn't need any special lighting effects, I knew that at once. I was shocked, so stunned by the reality that I could hardly say anything. I pulled her inside and shut the door. She felt so warm and real, and the way she gave a little exclamation and stumbled a little and smiled and regained her balance. And the dress—my favorite black thin dress clinging to her as if her body were wet. Even the familiar odor—that acrid peppery sweat mingled with perfume.

This was Elsa—but with one marvelous difference. This was the Elsa I had always really wanted and deserved. And when she spoke her voice was the way I had always wanted it, too.

"I want to please you, darling. I want to make up for everything. I don't want to say I'm sorry. I want to show you."

Her voice had a pleasant quality, as it was when I'd first met her. Before I knew what she was really like. It reminded me of the unconscious murmuring of someone dreaming.

I picked her up and sat her on my lap. I pressed her to me. How warm and responsive she was now. The calves of her legs reminded me of Elsa's. She had the same unconstrained manner as Elsa should always have had with me and had displayed with others. Now only for me.

I told her to get on the bed and she did. I was trembling and laughing as I leaned over to see her more plainly. It was no illusion. She had come here, willingly, obediently. She would surrender her body to me. She would give herself to me, with her eyes closed. I laughed. I ran around the room. My leg muscles were functioning with suppleness and speed that I hadn't known for such a long time. Then I insulted her and slapped her and she said, "Yes, darling. I only want you. Love me, love me, I'm yours. Do anything you want with me."

I knelt on the bed and examined her thoroughly. I compared her body, every inch of it. I saw the line of her thigh and that fine little band of hair across the small of her back. The birth mark on her right side over the third rib—

I made her walk around and

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come back to the bed, back to me.

Then I had the idea that she moved like a sleepwalker, independently of any will of her own. She seemed to be asleep, or dreaming, or perhaps in a half-dream, not quite asleep.

WHAT pleasant warmth and vitality seemed to be in her breath. I could breathe in the warmth for a while, I thought, and maybe I could come alive again.

Her arms pulled at my neck. And her face seemed to turn lean and drawn and cruel. I drew back and struck her to make her let go of me. I reminded her, myself, that this was the woman who had finally not allowed me any favors, who had ridiculed and humiliated me and left me nothing. I wanted to love her but—

I think she handed me the knife. She must have brought it in her handbag. I had no such knife as that. Yes, she smiled a little and looked fixedly at me and held out the knife. She knew I would want to use it. Yes, or so I thought yesterday—or was it the day before—

She sighed when I used the knife. I mean, it sighed. I felt her warm blood over me. I got off of the bed and dropped the knife and then I touched her in the dark. Cold. Oh she was turning cold and stiff like Hugo the joy-bringing pup, and all the others. I began washing everything. It was supposed to come off with clear water and didn't stain. It was perfumed I think, too, but I'm not sure. That isn't important. I felt so light and free as I sat on the floor and started to cough. No, not a cough, a kind of laugh.

Later I turned the light on. I had to laugh, remembering the little first-aid doll in the rubbish pit. Because drops of blood trickled from the neck on the bed. It was realistic all right. It was fixed to clot and turn black. My clothes, the bed, the floor, the walls, all realistically smeared. I had to smile. A terrific tension drained out of me and has continued to drain away.

I felt for the first time in at least two years that I could sleep. Sleep for days—

Last Entry (Undated)

ALL this, as if it were a kind of dream, seemed to waken me from a long, deep sleep. I was here in my room. Dark. Outside a steady rain drums on the window. Casements are slightly loose. The air makes them rattle.

I haven't looked at her again. I covered her with a blanket. I am frightened and confused about what to do next. I've been waiting but this is hardly a pleasant waiting room.

I remembered and put a few

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things together. They have added up unpleasantly. At least for me.

Hertzog's voice was familiar and I have remembered where I heard it before he came here. Elsa's artistic lover's voice. He used to call the house and I would listen on the extension phone. He used to do it brazenly and they would talk to taunt me. The man who had gotten her a job in the company touch-up department painting mouths.

I called the company. Hertzog had not checked in for work in two weeks.

Neither had Elsa Alding.

And that feeling of mine that she had come to me like a sleepwalker, independently of any will of her own. Drugged? In some sort of hypnotic trance?

At the apartment where she had gone to live with Hertzog, I was told that they both had left two weeks ago. No one seemed to know where.

Maybe Hertzog planned it all and used me. If Elsa behaved as she did with me, she would end up being just as poisonous and evil to anyone else, even Hertzog. He had used me to get rid of her.

I'm not certain. I can't be. I don't really know. But I've phoned for the police. They must decide if it's real or not.

But I've been thinking of that first-aid doll and the ad. The blood that's supposed to contain a powerful repellent against insects and especially against flies.

The bed is black with flies it seems to me. Those flies that were up there, the autumn flies that have come down from the ceiling.

Of course this could have been a different kind of fluid. And there is always false or misleading advertising, I know that. So I don't care. Not after thinking about it. No matter what they find out, I feel better. I feel so much better about everything. I've felt better now than at any time since I went to work for the company—

(The journal breaks off here.)

Commentary

A common retirement syndrom that I have observed is a manic disturbance, a compulsive neurosis coupled with persecution mania, nourished by hallucinations about automatons. In such cases the patient believes himself threatened by cunningly devised machinery and his world slowly transforms itself into a phantasmagoria, similar to the imaginings of medieval painters. He suffers often from the delusion of being encircled by evilly intentioned mechanisms.

—From Annual Report
Company Therapeutic
Adjustment Clinic.
Greater Animations Inc.

THE END

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On The River

Drifting toward the Falls, Farrell and the girl found reasons to buck the current. But—was it too late to try?

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

FARRELL was beginning to think that he had the River all to himself when he saw the girl. He had been traveling downstream for nearly two days now —River days, that is. He had no way of knowing for certain, but he was convinced that River time had very little to do with real time. There were days and nights here, yes, and twenty-four hours elapsed between each dawn. But there was a subtle difference between time as he had known it once and time as he knew it now.

The girl was standing at the water's edge, waving a diminutive handkerchief. It was obvious that she wanted him to pole over to the bank. He did so, forcing the raft out of the sluggish current and into the shallows. Several yards from shore it nudged bottom, and he leaned on the pole, holding the raft in position and looking questioningly at the girl. It surprised him to discover that she was young and attractive, although it shouldn't have, he supposed. Assuming that he had created her, it was only logical that he would have made her pleasing to the eye; and assuming that he had not, it was illogical to conclude that merely because he had reached the age of thirty it was necessary for someone else to reach the age of thirty in order not to want to go on living. Her hair was only a shade less bright than the splash of afternoon sunlight in which she stood, and she wore it very short. A scattering of freckles lightly dappled the bridge of her delicate nose and the immediate areas on either side. She was willowy, and rather tall, and she had blue eyes.

"I'd like to share your raft," she said across the several yards of water that separated her from

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him. "My own broke loose during the night and drifted downstream, and I've been walking ever since dawn."

Her yellow dress was torn in a dozen places, Farrell noticed, and the slender slippers that encased her feet had already reached the point of no return. "Sure," he said. "You'll have to wade to get on board, though. This is as far in as I can get."

"I don't mind."

The water came to her knees. He helped her up beside him; then, with a strong thrust of the pole, he sent the raft back into the current. The girl shook her head as though her hair had once been long and she had forgotten that it had been cut, and wanted the wind to blow it. "I'm Jill Nichols," she said. "Not that it matters very much."

"Clifford," Farrell said. "Clifford Farrell."

She sat down on the raft and removed her shoes and stockings. After laying the pole aside, he sat down a few feet from her. "I was beginning to think I was the only one making the journey," he said.

THE wind was moderate but brisk and was blowing upstream, and she faced into it as though expecting it to send her hair streaming behind her. The wind did its best, but succeeded only in ruffling the almost-curls that fringed her pale forehead. "I thought I was all alone, too."

"The way I had it figured," Farrell said, "the River was the product of my imagination. Now I see that it can't be—unless you're a product of my imagination also."

She smiled at him sideways. "Don't say that. I thought you were a product of mine."

He smiled back at her. It was the first time he had smiled in ages. "Maybe the River's an allegorical product of both our imaginations. Maybe this is the way you thought it would be, too. Drifting down a dark-brown stream, I mean, with trees on either hand and the blue sky above. Did you?"

"Yes," she said. "I've always thought that when the time came, it would be like this."

A thought struck him. "I took it for granted that because I'm here voluntarily, you are too. Are you?"

"Yes."

"Maybe," he went on, "two people visualizing an abstract idea by means of the same allegory can make that allegory come to life. Maybe, down through the years and without our being aware of it, we brought the River into existence."

"And then, when the time came, cast ourselves adrift on it? But where is the River? Surely, we can't still be on earth."

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He shrugged. "Who knows? Reality probably has a thousand phases mankind knows nothing about. Maybe we're in one of them. . . . How long have you been on the River?"

"A little over two days. I lost time today because I had to go on foot."

"I've been on it almost two days," Farrell said.

"I must have been the first to com—the first to cast myself adrift then." She wrung out her stockings and spread them on the raft to dry. She placed her bedraggled slippers beside them. She stared at the articles for some time. "Funny the way we do such things at a time like this," she said. "Why should it make any difference to me now whether my shoes and stockings are wet or dry?"

"I guess we're creatures of habit," he said. "Right up to the very end. Last evening, at the inn where I stayed the night, I shaved. True, there was an electric razor available; but why did I go to the trouble?"

She smiled wryly. "Last evening, at the inn where I stayed the night, I took a bath. I was going to put up my hair, but I caught myself just in time. It looks it, doesn't it?"

IT did, but he didn't say so. Nor did he gallantly deny the fact. Somehow, small talk seemed out of place. The raft was drifting past a small island now. There were many such islands in the River—bleak little expanses of sand and gravel for the most part, although all of them had at least one tree. He glanced at the girl. Was she seeing the island, too? Her eyes told him that she was.

Still he was not convinced. It was hard to believe that two people—two people who did not even know each other, in fact—could have transformed the process of dying into an allegorical illusion so strong that it was indistinguishable from ordinary reality. And it was harder yet to believe that those same two people could have entered into that illusion and have met each other for the first time.

It was all so strange. He felt real. He breathed, he saw; he experienced pleasure and pain. And yet all the while he breathed and saw and experienced he knew that he wasn't actually on the River. He *couldn't* be on the River, for the simple reason that in another phase of reality—the *real* phase—he was sitting in his car, in his garage, with the motor running and the garage doors closed.

And yet somehow, in a way that he could not fathom, he *was* on the River; drifting down the River on a strange raft that he had never built or bought and

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had never even known existed until he had found himself sitting on it nearly two days ago. Or was it two hours ago? Or two minutes? Or two seconds?

He did not know. All he knew was that, subjectively at least, almost forty-eight hours had passed since he had first found himself on the River. Half of those hours he had spent on the River itself, and the other half he had spent in two deserted inns, one of which he had found on the River bank at the close of the first afternoon and the other of which he had found on the River bank at the close of the second.

That was another strange thing about the River. It was impossible to travel on it at night. Not because of the darkness (although the darkness did impose a hazard), but because of an insurmountable reluctance on his own part—a reluctance compounded of dread and of an irresistible desire to interrupt his ineluctable journey long enough to—rest. Long enough to find peace. But why peace? he wondered. Wasn't it peace toward which the River was bearing him? Wasn't the only real peace the peace of oblivion? Surely by this time he should have accepted a truism as basic as that.

"It's beginning to get dark," Jill said. "There should be an inn soon." Her shoes and stockings had dried, and she put them back on.

"We'll watch for it. You keep an eye on the right bank and I'll keep an eye on the left."

The inn was on the right bank, built almost flush with the water's edge. A low pier protruded a dozen feet into the stream, and after securing the raft to it with the mooring line, Farrell stepped onto the heavy planking and helped Jill up beside him. So far as he could see, the inn—on the outside, at least—was not particularly different from the two he had already stayed overnight in. It was three-storied and square, and its tiers of windows made warm golden rectangles in the gathering dusk. The interior proved to be virtually identical too, give or take a few modifications—Jill's work, no doubt, since she must have collaborated on the creation. There was a small lobby, a bar, and a large dining room; a gleaming maple staircase curved upward to the second and third floors, and electric lights burned everywhere in the guise of counterfeit candles and imitation hurricane-lamps.

Farrell glanced around the dining room. "It looks as though you and I are slaves to American Colonial tradition," he said.

Jill laughed. "We do seem to have a lot in common, don't we?"

He pointed to a glittering juke box in the far corner of the room.

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"One of us, though, was a little mixed up. A juke box doesn't belong in an American Colonial setting."

"I'm afraid I'm the guilty party. There was a juke box just like that one in the inn where I stayed last night and in the inn where I stayed the night before."

"Apparently our inns vanish the minute we're out of sight. At any rate, I saw no sign of yours . . . I still can't help wondering whether we're the only force that holds this whole thing together. Maybe, the moment we're de— the moment we're gone—the whole business will disappear. Assuming of course that it has objective existence and *can* disappear."

She pointed to one of the dining-room tables. It was covered with an immaculate linen tablecloth and was set for two. Beside each place, a real candle—real, that is, to whatever extent it was possible for objects to be real in this strange land—burned in a silver candlestick. "*I* can't help wondering what we're going to have for dinner."

"The particular dish we happen to be hungry for most, I imagine. Last night I had a yen for southern-fried chicken, and southern-fried chicken was what I found waiting for me when I sat down."

"Funny, how we can take such miracles in our stride," she said. And then, "I think I'll freshen up a bit."

"I think I will too."

They chose rooms across the hall from each other. Farrell got back downstairs first and waited for Jill in the dining room. During their absence, two large covered trays and a silver coffee set appeared on the linen tablecloth. How this had been brought about, he could not fathom; nor did he try very hard. A hot shower had relaxed him, and he was permeated with a dream-like feeling of well-being. He even had an appetite, although he suspected that it was no more real than the food with which he would presently satisfy it would be. No matter. Stepping into the adjoining bar, he drew himself a short beer and drank it appreciatively. It was cold and tangy, and hit the spot. Returning to the dining room, he saw that Jill had come back downstairs and was waiting for him in the lobby doorway. She had repaired her torn dress as best she could and had cleaned her shoes, and there was a trace of lipstick on her lips and a touch of rouge on her cheeks. It dawned on him all of a sudden that she was positively stunning.

WHEN they sat down at the table, the lights dimmed, and the juke box began to play. In addition to the two covered

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trays and the silver coffee set, the magic tablecloth had also materialized a mouth-watering antipasto. They nibbled radishes by candlelight, ate carrots Julienne. Jill poured steaming coffee into delicate blue cups, added sugar and cream. She had "ordered" sweet potatoes and baked Virginia ham, he had "ordered" steak and French fries. As they dined, the juke box pulsed softly in the ghostly room and the candle flames flickered in drafts that came through invisible crevices in the walls. When they finished eating, Farrell went into the bar and brought back a bottle of champagne and two glasses. After filling both glasses, he touched his to hers. "To the first day we met," he said, and they drank.

Afterward, they danced on the empty dance floor. Jill was a summer wind in his arms. "Are you a professional dancer?" he asked.

"I was."

He was silent. The music was dream-like, unreal. The big room was a place of soft lights and pale shadows. "I was an artist," he went on presently. "One of the kind whose paintings no one buys and who keep themselves going on scraps of hopes and crusts of dreams. When I first began to paint I thought that what I was doing was somehow noble and worthwhile; but a schoolboy conviction can't last forever, and finally I recognized and accepted the fact that nothing I would ever paint would justify my having gone without even so much as a single helping of mashed potatoes. But that's not why I'm on the River."

"I danced in night clubs," Jill said. "Not nice dances, but I was not a stripper."

"Were you married?"

"No. Were you?"

"Only to my work, and my work and I have been divorced for some time now. Ever since I took a job designing greeting cards."

"It's funny," she said, "I never thought it would be like this. Dying, I mean. Whenever I pictured myself on the River, I pictured myself on it alone."

"So did I," Farrell said. And then, "Where did you live, Jill?"

"In Rapids City."

"Why, that's where I lived too. Maybe that has something to do with our meeting each other in this strange land. I—I wish I had known you before."

"You know me now. And I know you."

"Yes. It's better than never having gotten to know each other at all."

They danced in silence for a while. The inn dreamed around them. Outside, beneath stars that had no right to be, the River flowed, dark-brown and brooding in the night. At length, when the

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waltz to which they were dancing came to an end, Jill said, "I think we should call it a day, don't you?"

"Yes," Farrell said, looking down into her eyes, "I suppose we should." And then, "I'll wake at dawn—I know I will. Will you?"

She nodded. "That's part of it, too—waking at dawn. That, and listening for the falls."

He kissed her. She stood immobile for a moment, then drew away. "Good night," she said, and hurried from the room.

"Good night," he called after her.

He stood in the suddenly empty room for some time. Now that she had gone, the juke box played no more and the lights had brightened and taken on a cold cast. He could hear the River, hear it whispering a thousand and one sad thoughts. Some of the thoughts were his, and some of them were Jill's.

At last he left the room and climbed the stairs. He paused in front of Jill's door. He raised his hand, knuckles turned toward the panel. He could hear her in the room beyond, hear her bare feet padding on the floor and the rustle of her dress as she slipped out of it for the night. Presently he heard the faint whisper of sheets and the muffled creak of springs. And all the while he heard these sounds, he heard the soft, sad susurrus of the River.

At length his hand fell to his side, and he turned and stepped across the hall and let himself into his own room. He closed the door firmly. Love and death might go together, but love-making and dying did not.

THE sound of the River grew louder while he slept, and in the morning it was a steady murmur in his ears. Breakfast was eggs and bacon and toast and coffee served by ghosts, and gray words spoken in the gray light of dawn. With the rising of the sun he and Jill cast off, and soon the inn was far behind them.

A little past midday, they heard the roar of the falls.

It was a gentle roar at first, but it grew louder, decibel by decibel, and the river narrowed and began flowing between bleak gray cliffs. Jill moved closer to Farrell, and Farrell took her hand. Rapids danced around them, drenching them at sporadic intervals with ice-cold spray. The raft lurched beneath them, turned first this way and that at the whim of the River. But it did not capsize, nor would it, for it was the falls that stood for death —not the rapids.

Farrell kept glancing at the girl. She was staring straight ahead of her as though the rapids did not exist, as though nothing existed except herself, Far-

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rell, and the raft. He had not expected death to come so soon. He had thought that life, now that he had met Jill, would linger on. But apparently this strange country which they had somehow brought into being had no function save to destroy them.

Well destruction was what he wanted, wasn't it? A strange encounter in a strange land could not have changed that, any more than it could have changed it for Jill. A thought struck him, and, raising his voice above the gurgling of the rapids and the roar of the falls, he asked, "What did you use, Jill?"

"Gas," she answered. "And you?"

"Carbon monoxide."

They said no more.

Late in the afternoon, the River widened again, and the cliffs gradually gave way to gently sloping banks. Beyond the banks vague hills showed, and the sky seemed to have taken on a bluer cast. The roar of the falls was deafening now, but apparently the falls themselves were still a considerable distance downstream. Maybe this wasn't the last day after all.

It wasn't. Farrell knew it the minute he saw the inn. It was on the left bank, and it appeared a little while before the sun was about to set. The current was swift now, and very strong, and it required the combined efforts of both him and the girl to pole the raft in to the small pier. Breathing hard, and soaked to the skin, they clung to each other till they caught their breaths. Then they went inside.

Warmth rose up to meet them, and they rejoiced in it. They chose rooms on the second floor, dried their clothes, made themselves presentable, and joined each other in the dining room for the evening meal. Jill had a roast-beef dinner and Farrell had scalloped potatoes and pork chops. He had never tasted anything so delicious in all his life, and he savored every mouthful. Lord, but it was good to be alive!

Astonished at the thought, he stared at his empty plate. *Good* to be alive? Then why was he sitting in his car with the motor running and the garage doors closed, waiting to die? What was he doing on the River? He raised his eyes to Jill's, saw from the bewilderment in them that the face of all the world had changed for her, too, and knew that as surely as she was responsible for his new outlook, he was responsible for hers.

"Why did you do it, Jill?" he asked. "Why?"

She looked away. "As I told you, I used to dance in night clubs. Not nice dances, but I wasn't a stripper either—not in the strict sense of the word. But

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even though my act could have been far worse, it was still bad enough to awaken something in me that I didn't know existed. Anyway, one night I ran away, and not long after that I joined a convent."

SHE was silent for a while, and so was he. Then she said, looking at him now, "It's funny about a person's hair—what it can come to stand for, I mean. I wore my hair very long, and it was the most essential part of my act. The only decent part, because it covered my nakedness. Without my knowing what was happening, it came to symbolize for me the only really decent quality I possessed. But I didn't tumble to the truth until it was too late. With my hair, I had been able to live with myself. Without it, I felt unfit to live. I—I ran away again—to Rapids City this time—and I got a job in a department store and rented a small apartment. But a decent job wasn't enough—I needed something more. Winter arrived, and I came down with the flu. You know how it weakens you sometimes, how depressed you can feel afterwards. I—I—"

She looked down at her hands. They lay on the table before her, and they were slender and very white. The sad susurrus of the River filled the room, muting the throb of the juke box. Backgrounding both sounds was the roar of the falls.

Farrell looked down at his own hands. "I guess I was sick, too," he said. "I must have been. I felt empty. Bored. Do you know what true boredom is? It's a vast, gnawing nothingness that settles around you and accompanies you wherever you go. It comes over you in great gray waves and inundates you. It suffocates you. I said that my giving up the kind of work I wanted to do wasn't responsible for my being on the River, and it wasn't—not directly. But my boredom was a reaction, just the same. Everything lost meaning for me. It was like waiting all your life for Christmas to come, and then getting up Christmas morning and finding an empty stocking. If I could have found something in the stocking—anything at all—I might have been all right. But I found nothing in it, absolutely nothing. I know now that it was my fault. That the only way anyone can expect to find something in his Christmas stocking is by placing something in it the night before, and that the nothingness I saw around me was merely a reflection of myself. But I didn't know these things then." He raised his head and met her eyes across the table. "Why did we have to die in order to meet each other and want to live? Why couldn't we have met like other

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people—in a summer park or on a quiet street? Why did we have to meet on the River, Jill? Why?"

She stood up, crying. "Let's dance," she said. "Let's dance all night."

THEY drifted onto the empty dance floor and the music rose around them and took them in its arms—the sad and the gay and the poignant songs that first one of them and then the other remembered from the lifetimes they had cast aside. "That one's from my Senior Prom," she said once. "The one we're dancing to now," he said a short while afterward, "dates from the days when I was still a kid and thought I was in love." "And were you in love?" she asked, eyes gentle upon his face. "No," he answered, "not then. Not ever—until now." "I love you, too," she said, and the tune took on a softer note and for a long while time ceased to be.

Toward dawn, she said, "I hear the River calling. Do you hear it, too?"

"Yes," he said, "I hear it."

He tried to fight the call, and so did she. But it wasn't any use. They left the ghosts of themselves dancing in the dawnlight and went down to the pier and boarded the raft and cast off. The current seized them greedily and the roar of the falls took on a triumphant tone. Ahead, in the wan rays of the rising sun, mist was rising high above the gorge.

They sat close together on the raft, in each other's arms. The roar was a part of the air they breathed now, and the mist was all around them. Through the mist, a vague shape showed. Another raft? Farrell wondered. He peered into the ghostly vapor, saw the little trees, the sandy shore. An island . . .

Suddenly he understood what the islands in the River represented. Neither he nor Jill had truly wanted to die, and as a result the allegory which they had jointly brought to life and entered into contained loopholes. There might be a way back after all.

Springing to his feet, he seized the pole and began poling. "Help me, Jill!" he cried. "It's our last chance."

She, too, had seen the island and divined its significance. She joined him, and they poled together. The current was omnipotent now, the rapids furious. The raft lurched, heaved, wallowed. The island loomed larger through the mist. "Harder, Jill, harder!" he gasped. "We've got to get back—we've *got* to!"

He saw then that they weren't going to make it, that despite their combined efforts the current was going to carry them past their last link with life. There was one chance, and only

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one. He kicked off his shoes. "Keep poling, Jill!" he shouted, and, after placing the end of the mooring line between his teeth and biting into it, he leaped into the rapids and struck out for the island for all he was worth.

Behind him, the raft lurched wildly, tearing the pole from Jill's grasp and sending her sprawling on the deck. He did not know this, however, till he reached the island and looked over his shoulder. By then, there was just enough slack remaining in the line for him to belay it around a small tree and secure it in place. The tree shuddered when the line went taut, and the raft came to an abrupt stop several feet from the brink of the falls. Jill was on her hands and knees now, trying desperately to keep herself from being thrown from the deck. Gripping the line with both hands, he tried to pull the raft in to the island, but so strong was the current that he would have been equally as successful if he had tried to pull the island in to the raft.

The little tree was being gradually uprooted. Sooner or later it would be torn out of the ground and the raft would plunge over the falls. There was only one thing to do. "Your apartment, Jill!" he shouted across the whiteness of the rapids. "Where is it?"

Her voice was barely audible. "229 Locust Avenue. Number 301."

He was stunned. 229 Locust Avenue was the apartment building next to the one where he lived. Probably they had almost run into each other a dozen times. Maybe they *had* run into each other, and forgotten. In the city, things like that happened every day.

But not on the River.

"Hold on, Jill!" he called. "I'm going the long way around!"

TO travel from the island to the garage required but the merest flick of a thought. He came to in his car, head throbbing with misted pain. Turning off the ignition, he got out, threw open the garage doors, and staggered out into the shockingly cold winter's night. He remembered belatedly that his hat and coat were in the back of the car.

No matter. He crammed his lungs with fresh air and rubbed snow on his face. Then he ran down the street to the apartment building next door. Would he be in time? he wondered. He could not have been in the garage more than ten minutes at the most, which meant that time on the River moved at an even faster pace than he had thought. Hours, then, had already passed since he had left the island, and the raft could very well have gone over the falls.

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Or had there really been a raft? A River? A girl with sunbright hair? Maybe the whole thing had been a dream—a dream that his unconscious had manufactured in order to snap him back to life.

The thought was unendurable, and he banished it from his mind. Reaching the apartment building, he ran inside. The lobby was deserted, and the elevator was in use. He pounded up three flights of stairs and paused before her door. It was locked. "Jill!" he called, and broke it down.

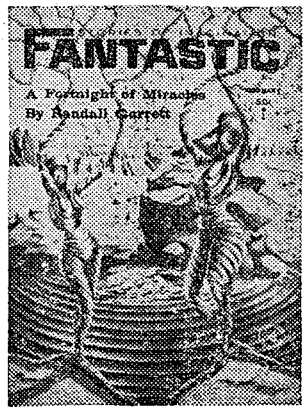
She was lying on the living-room sofa, her face waxen in the radiance of a nearby floor lamp. She was wearing the yellow dress that he remembered so well, only now it was no longer torn. Nor were her slender slippers bedraggled. Her hair, though, was just the way he remembered it—short, and trying to curl. Her eyes were closed.

He turned off the gas in the fireless circulating heater that stood against the wall, and he threw open all of the windows. He picked her up and carried her over to the largest one and let the sweet-life-giving air embrace her. "Jill!" he whispered. "Jill!"

Her eyelids quivered, opened. Blue eyes filled with terror gazed up into his face. Slowly, the terror faded away, and recognition took its place. He knew then that there would be no more Rivers for either of them.

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH



Conventions are often filled with fun . . . or work . . . or politics. But in next month's FANTASTIC we bring you a story of a convention of magicians which was filled with nothing but surprises—*mostly rude ones.* For a frolicsome time, attend it by reading **Randall Garrett's** A Fortnight of Miracles.

Also in the February FANTASTIC will be the concluding instalment of **John Brunner's** novel, Repairmen of Cyclops; other short stories and our usual features.

Be sure to get February FANTASTIC on sale January 21.

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the REPAIRMEN OF CYCLOPS

By JOHN BRUNNER

Illustrator SCHELLING

First of Two Parts

Cyclops was a poor planet. It could not afford to lose the Galactic Corps base which supported its economy. On the other hand, Alura Quist could not afford to lose her youth and beauty. The choice was hers.

THE sky rang with the reverberation of the fierce white sunlight like the interior of a blue drum. Wind hot as the breath of a furnace teased the silver ocean into ripples, and the ripples shattered the sun's image into a blazing pathway of diamond fragments. Itching with sweat, aching with tension, Justin Kolb had to narrow his eyes even behind his wholeface visor because the response-limit of the glass was exceeded if he turned his head towards that glistening track over the water and the opacity curve took a sudden dive towards complete blankness.

Maddeningly, it was to sunward that he had caught the first wing-glints.

He had expected that the sight of the Jackson's buzzards would crystallize his formless tension into the old familiar excitement, re-unite mind and body into the efficient combination, as much weapon as person, which was Justin Kolb at peak operational efficiency. He had been trying for so long to get away on his own like this, on the hunter's trail

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which now had to make do for his old, preferred pastimes, that the strain of habituation to waiting had soured his keen anticipation of the chase.

Only till I see the buzzards, he had promised himself. *And then—*

But he'd seen the buzzards at last, when he had half decided he was too far north even at this season, two days past midsummer, and the instant of thrill had been—an instant. Now he was back in the slough of dreary awareness which had plagued him the whole of yesterday and the whole of the day before. He was conscious of suffocating heat, of blinding brightness, of prickling perspiration, of cramp from keeping the skimmer level and aligned despite the tug of the waves. His hands were slippery on the controls, and the hard butt of his harpoon-gun seemed to take up twice as much room on the skimmer's deck as it usually did.

Briefly, he shut his eyes, wishing with all his force that somehow time could turn back and he could be free to return to space.

But Cyclops was a relatively poor world. It could not support luxury spaceflight. Out there, a man had to be productive—mining asteroids, servicing solar power relays, doing some clock-around job with the absolute concentration of machinery.

What the hell am I now? A gigolo.

The thought passed. True or not, he was at least able to indulge this much of his thirst for excitement and challenge; if he had taken any other of the courses open to him, he would have been drudging away this glorious summer in a city or on a farm or in some squalid fishing-port, pestered continually by the demands of other people, by the need to stack up work-credits, by holes in his shoes or leaks in his roof.

Even her high-and-mightiness is preferable to that . . .

He blinked. The wing-glints had come again, and this time remained in view instead of vanishing into the blur of heat-haze and shimmery reflection along the skyline. His pulse beat faster as he began to count: five, six—eight, ten, at least a dozen and possibly more.

Name of the cosmos, but it must be a giant!

FOR one moment, uncharacteristic alarm filled him. He had come deliberately to this northern extreme of the wolf-sharks' range, because those that beat a path of slaughter more than a hundred miles from the equatorial shallows which were their customary habitat were certain to be the largest and greediest specimens, and after his long im-

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patient chafing in Frecity he had felt nothing less than a monster would compensate him.

But seeing a dozen or more buzzards hovering was a shock.

It was perhaps the most characteristic sight on Cyclops: Jackson's buzzards, swift, cruel-taloned, steely-winged, on the track of a wolfshark, which killed for savage delight and not for hunger, so that even the monstrous appetities of the birds were easily glutted by its gore-leaking victims. At this time of year, nearer the equator, one could look out over the sea and espy as many as five or six groups of the carrion-eaters following the blood-smeared killers, for the ocean teemed with life.

Yet it was rare to see more than six buzzards to every wolfshark. By twos and threes, they would sate themselves and flap heavily away, while others took their place, the total number in the sky remaining roughly constant. And there were reasons why those that roamed furthest north were followed usually only by two or three buzzards: first, the sea offered fewer victims and hence less carrion; second, the birds were still feeding their young at this time of year, and could not wander too far from their breeding-mats, the vast raft-like assemblies of Cyclops kelp found only in a narrow belt round the planet's center.

Nonetheless, here it was: a wolfshark so big, so fast, and so murderous that a hundred miles away from home it was killing in quantities great enough to tip the balance in this buzzards' dim minds on the side of greed rather than loyalty to their offspring.

He pursed his lips and eased his harpoon-gun closer to the firing-notch cut in the forward gunwale of the skimmer. Would one shot do the job? Would it be better to load first with an unlined harpoon, to weaken the killer, before risking a shot with line attached and the consequent danger of being dragged to the bottom? Had this enormous beast been attacked and escaped before—if it had, how many times? The more often, the warier it would be of an approaching skimmer, and the more likely it would be to attack even if there was easy prey closer to hand.

He weighed possibilities with half his mind, while with the other half he reviewed the area where he found himself.

This was the water-hemisphere of Cyclops, insofar as the differentiation was meaningful. It was a shallow-sea planet—its moon being rather small, and incapable of raising large tides either in the crustal material or in the oceans, although its sun exerted considerable tidal influence.

The shallowness of the sea,

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combined with a total volume of water close to the average for Class A planets (those on which human beings could survive, eating some of the vegetation and at least a few of the native animals) meant that the dry-land area was chopped up into small sections. The other half of the planet boasted some quite sizable islands, and even a quasi-continent consisting of a score of large islands linked by isthmuses. This side was sparsely inhabited, and the largest island within hundreds of miles was officially not even part of Cyclops but a repair and recreation base for the Corps Galactica.

A certain amount of fishing; a certain amount of scrap-reclamation; some terrafarms on islands isolated enough to be worth maintaining as pure-human ecological units against the risk of drifting seeds and wandering fauna from the Cyclops-normal islands around them—that was the sum of human engagement with this hemisphere, apart from solar and tidal power installations operating with a minimum of manned supervision.

KOLB hesitated. Then he gave a harsh laugh. Was he going to let the risk of dying alone and far from rescue prevent him from going after this record-breaking wolfshark? He would never be able to face his image in the mirror again!

In any case, out in space he had faced death not hundrdes, but hundreds of thousands of miles from his fellow men.

His mind darkened briefly. He never cared to recall the circumstances that had brought him back from space to a planet-bound existence, and forbidden him to combine his lust for danger with valuable work. There was nothing of value to anyone but himself in this single-handed hunting; men had shared Cyclops with wolfsharks for long enough to determine the limits within which they could be a nuisance, and if the necessity arose, the species was culled efficiently and with precision by teams of men working from the air.

In fact, thought Kolb greyly, *there's damned little value to anybody in anything I've done with my life lately. Least of all to me . . .*

Slowly, as the wing-glints came closer, following a line that would pass him within some four or five miles and if extended would eventually approach the island where the Corps Galactica maintained the repair base, a kind of muted exultation filled him. He could see now that the buzzards were too full already to make more than token swoops on what the wolfshark killed, yet—

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as though admiring the energy of the beast—they none of them made to flap back to the south and their breeding-mats.

It'll break all the records. I never even heard of such a giant!

He put aside the unlined harpoon which his hand had automatically sought for the first shot. With fingers as exact as a surgeon's, he loaded a harpoon with line attached, and laid the gun in its firing-notch.

Then he closed his left hand on the control levers, and without a tremor fed power to the reactor.

The skimmer leapt up on its planes with a shriek loud enough to startle a wolfshark at twice this range, and instantly the wheeling buzzards disgorged the last food they had eaten and climbed a safe hundred feet into the sky. Just audible over the thrum of power from his craft, Kolb heard their whickering cries, like the neighing of frightened horses.

And one of his questions was answered, anyway. This wolfshark had been attacked before, often enough to recognize a skimmer for the danger it represented. It forgot its business of stitching a line of destruction across the peaceful ocean, and spun around in the water to confront the fragile boat. It lowered its tail and spread its fans, and its head rose to the surface.

Kolb's self-possession wavered, so that he had to cling desperately to his unverbalized decision: *it doesn't matter if I die or not!* Thinking of it as huge, and seeing how huge it was, were two different things.

How big, then? Fifty feet from fan-tip to fan-tip, oscillating in the water like a manta ray, but having a tapered body which was all keel for the muscles driving those fans, perfectly streamlined; a mere twitch, a single shrug of those muscles would hurl it torpedo-swift on anything else which swam the waters of Cyclops, and jaws which could open to engulf a man would clamp serrated rows of fangs into, and *through*, the victim. The bite killed, and the killer forgot. In summer, it was never hungry. It swallowed what its jaws held, and that sufficed until the next kill, minutes later.

Kolb silenced the yammering alarms in his mind and lined up the sights of his gun rock-steady on the center of the maw.

And then, with the distance closing to two hundred yards, a hundred and fifty, there came the boom.

It rocked the skimmer. It startled the wolfshark. It was the noise of a Corps Galactica spacecraft braking at the edge of atmosphere to put down at the repair base.

By a reflex not even the danger of death could overrule, ex-

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spaceman Justin Kolb glanced up, and the sun shone full on his wholeface visor, triggering and overloadng the glare response, so that he was blind. He cried out, his hand closing on the trigger of his gun. The harpoon whistled wide of a target, and the wolf-shark charged.

II

DURING the flight Maddalena Santos had mostly sat staring at nothing, turning over and over in her mind the decision which now confronted her: to stay on, or not, in the Patrol Service.

Three other passengers were aboard—personnel from an airless Corps base further out towards the limits of the explored galaxy, on rotating local leave and very excited about it. Two of them were men. The fact that these men looked at her once only told her something about the effect of the last twenty years on her appearance.

It was one thing to know that she was assured of another two centuries of life. It was another to realize on this first visit to civilization in so long a time how deep the impact of two decades on a barbarian world had gone.

She was assured of her longevity by the Patrol's pay-scale; in a galaxy where the older worlds were so rich it literally made no difference whether a given individual worked or not, it required either accidental dedication or a tempting bait to enlist volunteers for the necessary drudgery of governmental service.

Not that you can really call it government, Maddalena reminded herself listlessly. *It's more like herding cattle. And lazy cattle, at that.*

The other branches of government service paid at lower rates; only the Patrol paid ten-for-one in the unique currency of life.

She had served twenty years as an on-planet agent, among stinking barbarians lost in a mud-wallow, and she was entitled—if she chose to take it here and now—to a guaranteed two centuries of comfortable, healthy life, anywhere she chose. She could even go clear back to Earth, for she had been born there.

Wistfully, she looked at the black starspangled backdrop of space, wondering what had happened on the mother world in the period she had been away.

She had been so optimistic . . . Right at the beginning of her career, when she was making out so badly in the Corps that she risked not even being promoted lieutenant from her initial probationer status—and hence losing forever her chance at longevity-payment—she had saved

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everything and indeed acquired some small reputation by a successful coup on a barbarian planet: one of the isolated Zarathustra Refugee Planets where fugitives had survived after fleeing the hell of the Zarathustra nova more than seven centuries previous.

But when she was offered a post as an on-planet agent, supervising and watching the progress of these stranded outcasts of humanity, since she was not permitted to return to the world where she had stirred up such a to-do, she had had to pick almost at random from the existing four or five vacancies.

And she had realized quite shortly after being assigned her post, in which the minimum stay was twenty years, that she had chosen wrong.

It had seemed that something was going to happen on the planet she selected—a transition from the typical mud-grubbing peasant level where many of the refugees had got stuck, to an expanding phase of incipient civilization, with some industrialization and a great deal of cross-cultural influence—fascinating material to study at first-hand.

But that occurrence depended on the survival of an organizational genius who had inherited the headship of a strategically sited city-state. And within a month of her arrival, one of his jealous rivals assassinated him and seized power, condemning the planet to at least one more generation of stagnancy.

She was absolutely forbidden to interfere. And, having to sit helplessly by and watch nothing happen, she had grown so bored she hardly dared think about it.

Now was time for leave, and reassignment. Her "death" had been arranged; her successor had been briefed and was even now aboard the Patrol ship which would land him with utter secrecy to take over his carefully prepared role in the local society . . . and she was on her way to Cyclops, a planet she had never conceived she might want to visit.

Yet she had welcomed the reasonless order to come here before proceeding on leave. The delay gave her time to arrive at the decision she had postponed so long: stay on, ask for transfer to some lower-paying job, or resign?

She thought enviously of Gus Langenschmidt, the Patrol Major who had maintained the beat including her assigned world when she first went there; he was aging, greying, even running to fat when she last saw him, yet because he could think of no better purpose to which to devote his accrued longevity, he was continuing far beyond the maximum service-time which

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qualified for ten-to-one pay. Five centuries was the limit of credit. Fifty years in the Patrol.

More than the total of years I've yet lived, Maddalena reflected. *How is Gus? Where is he? It would have been easier to endure my job if I'd known he was still going to call two or three times a year—but they pulled him off his beat to do something else when he topped the limit, and I could never like his successor so well.*

THE communicators announced the imminence of planetfall. The whisper of air began on the hull, like the drumming of scores of marching feet. Maddalena leaned back and closed her eyes, struggling once more with the irresoluble problem. She scarcely noticed the actual landing period, although her fellow passengers were chattering and joking and exchanging snippets of information about Cyclops. A rough world, they thought it was.

Rough world! Maddalena echoed silently. *These soft-handed chair-warmers should go where I've just come from!*

And yet . . .

Her mind drifted back two decades on the instant. "A predatory kind of world"—that was the description she had been given when it was first learned Cyclopeans were behind the interference with a ZRP which she had cancelled out by an inspired improvization.

What did they want her here for, anyway? Why in the galaxy had that message come through at the Corps base where she had been trying to decide whether to go all the way home to Earth for her leave-year, instructing that she be sent to Cyclops on the next available flight?

The answer turned up the moment the locks were opened on the landing-ground—or rather, pontoon. Cyclops, having so much water, had correspondingly little dry ground available for parking spaceships. More than a dozen vessels were in view from the seat in which she still sat listlessly although the others had risen excitedly to await permission to step outside. The gawky shapes of cranes, the abstract formations of hulls in process of cutting up for scrap, the clean bright rails of overhead gantries, wove webs of metal across the blinding blue background of a summer sky.

She had not expected to find such bright light; the primary of the world she had left was cooler than Earth's, but that of Cyclops was whiter and hotter.

A man in summer undress uniform, hair clipped close and indicating that he was called on to fly space where long hair was forbidden because it was dan-

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gerous inside a helmet, hauled himself dexterously through the lock even before the mobile gangway trundled into position. He peered down the shadowy aisle of the passenger cabin.

"Senior Lieutenant Santos?" he inquired.

Maddalena stirred and got up.

"The base commandant is waiting for you," the man said. "Would you come with me?"

The other passengers exchanged resentful glances, especially the woman. She had never been out of range of civilized cosmetic treatment, and her age was impossible to assess, whereas Maddalena had had to age the full twenty years she'd spent where cosmetics were mere primitive pastes and powders.

She obeyed the instruction apathetically. But the moment she came to the lock and saw who was waiting below in the open cockpit of the ground-skimmer, she forgot everything in a wave of pure joy.

"*Gus!*" she shouted, and went down the gangway three steps at a time to hurl her arms around his neck.

"Easy, girl, easy!" he said, disengaging her grip. "I have to maintain some show of authority around this dump, even though I hate it. Let's have a look at you. It's been a long time."

Maddalena pulled back to arm's reach and studied her old friend. "You look better on it than I do," she said with a twinge of envy. And indeed he did; his grey hair had been treated, his face smoothed to wipe away worry-lines, his waistline trimmed to a lean youthfulness. In his immaculate commandant-rank uniform, he looked like a come-on advertisement for Patrol recruitment.

"Have to maintain appearances, the same way you've had to," he grunted. "Here, get in and I'll run you back to my HQ for a bit of refreshment. Your gear will be taken care of. It's not often I get the chance to use my position for my own amusement, but this time I've done it, and you're getting the finest treatment the planet can afford."

"Amusement?" Maddalena said, relaxing with a sigh into the soft padding of the passenger seat. "Did you fetch me here simply for amusement?"

Langenschmidt, easing the ground-skimmer around the tail of the newly landed ship—the metal shell of the pontoon resonated under them—shot a startled glance at her.

"Weren't you told why you were being sent here? I'd have expected you to raise hell at having your leave postponed when you've waited twenty years for it!"

"No, I just did as I was told."

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Maddalena narrowed her eyes against the brilliant sunshine and let her gaze rove over the tidily-parked spaceships.

"Hm! You must have changed in the years since we last met," Langenschmidt said. "You used to be a considerable spitfire. Well, I— Well!" He ran his hand around the collar of his full-dress jacket. "I'd better start by explaining, hadn't I? It's to do with the ZRP's, of course. The row about non-interference has blown up yet once more—it's been in the wind since shortly before I was recalled from my beat and put in charge here, and I was put in charge here for precisely the reason that the center of the whole brewing row was right on Cyclops."

Maddalena, hardly paying attention, made some sort of sound comment.

LANGENSCHMIDT went on: "In fact, some of it was to do with our little affair at Carrig. Although they were never able to come out and complain openly, the pride of the Cyclops government was badly hurt by the fact that a hundred or so Cyclopeans had been dropped into volcanoes by dirty smelly barbarians, and that we hadn't acted to stop this because of the principle of non-interference with ZRP development. It takes years to stir up trouble when there are two hundred and whatever—two hundred sixty, isn't it?—worlds with a say in running the Corps, but a determined party can get the wheels turning eventually. And on Cyclops we have just such a determined party. Her name is Alura Quist, and if there weren't officially a representative government here I'd say she was a dictator. She's just—ah—unstoppable.

"The Cyclopeans don't like having our base here, but they can't balance their planetary budget without the revenue it brings in. So short of kicking the Corps off-planet, there's only one way then can get back at us for the Carrig business. That's to attack our prized principle of non-interference. And with a view to this, Quist is right now staging a big conference on the subject, with delegates from all kinds of worlds including Earth, and frankly I'm horrified at the influential names she's managed to rope in.

"The problem is in my lap, Maddalena, and I've worried myself stupid about it. They put me here to try and stave off what Quist is doing, and I'm losing out. When I heard you were at the end of your tour, I thought, 'By Cosmos! She's from Earth, and out this way Earthborn Corpsmen are few and far between—she's served as an on-

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planet agent, so she has first-hand testimony available.' For all these and several other reasons, I thought maybe you'd jolt my mind out of its old grooves and somehow inspired me to get the better of Quist."

Maddalena stirred and turned her finely-shaped head. Her former look of fragility, Langenschmidt noted, had faded, and she seemed toughened and far less feminine.

"After twenty years watching a gang of Zarathustra refugees getting nowhere, Gus, I'm pretty well convinced myself that it's a crime to leave them to make fools of themselves. I'm sorry to disappoint you within minutes of our first meeting in years, but that's the way I feel right now, and if you want to convince the delegates to this conference that non-interference is the right course, you can start by trying it on me!"

III

FOR the third time Bracy Dyge began on the miscellaneous collection of transistors littering the bottom of his spares box, hoping against hope that the fault in his fish-finder would put itself right. He was four days from port, even if he started home right away, in this sluggish ancient trawler which represented his whole family's means of support—with himself as sole able-bodied seaman. He had been four days on the fishing-grounds, and only last night had he got hold of the fact that the reason for his inability to locate any schools of oilfish lay in an equipment fault, not in a total absence of fish.

For some reason far beyond his rudimentary technical knowledge to fathom, the fish-finder refused to signal anything closer than the bottom of the sea. With maddening precision it delineated on its circular screen the profile of the rocks three hundred feet below his keel, but it wouldn't even show the big plastic bucket he was trailing as a sea-anchor.

Transistors were expensive, and it was impossible to tell by merely looking at them whether they were in functional condition or not. Accordingly, he couldn't say whether those he had salvaged at various times and popped in the spares box were better, or worse, than the ones installed in the fish-finder already. He could merely try every possible combination until he had exhausted the last permutation, and since there were altogether sixteen transistors in the fish-finder and seven in the spares box, it was proving an impossibly long job.

At least, however, it was ridding him of some useless junk.

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Two of the spares had put the fish-finder completely out of action, and these he had tossed overboard with annoyance.

The sun was baking hot, and the sea was completey featureless. His trawler, shabby and paint-peeling, was the only sign of life as far as he could see. On the afterdeck, in the exiguous shadow of a torn plastic awning, he sat with legs crossed, using the front plate off the fish-finder housing as a tray for the loose parts. He was very lean and the summer had tanned his naturally dark skin to the color of old rich leather. His hair hung around his shoulders in thick braids, and a shiny but sea-tarnished chrome ring was threaded through the pierced lobe of his left ear. Anyone with a knowledge of the culture of Cyclops would have placed him instantly, even without stopping to consider his off-white loincloth and elastic sandals: a fisherboy from one of the sea-hemisphere ports, most likely Gratignol, and doing rather badly this year.

Correct. Morosely, Bracy discovered that another transistor was worthless, and that made three over the side.

At least, he promised himself, he was not going to turn for home before he had exhausted all possibilities for self-help. Even then . . .

His stomach churned and his mind quailed at the prospect of going home with an empty hold. Better, surely, to cruise at random until his nets chanced on something for the family to eat, even if he found no oilfish. Oilfish were the only salable species in this part of the ocean; eating fish could be got by anyone, simply by casting a few lines with bait. Oilfish travelled in vast schools of eight to ten thousand, but because the schools were so big they were likewise concentrated, and without a fish-finder one might hunt for weeks and not cross the path of a single school.

If only he belonged to a different family . . . ! If he were one of the Agmess boys, for instance, six brothers of whom two had sufficient technical skill not merely to do their own electronics repairs but actually to build equipment for other families' boats. . . But by the same token, they guarded their knowledge well. He would have to go home and pay for their assistance, or pay someone else—what with, after a fruitless voyage? Agmess boats had radio, too, and in the event of a breakdown they could signal for help, whereas he was on his own, in charge of the boat which supported his four sisters, his grandmother and his eight-year-old younger brother.

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HE was himself seventeen years old. He had been the breadwinner of the family since the great storm of the winter before last during which his parents had been drowned in the capsizing of a lifeboat put out to rescue a damned fool.

Add me to the list, Bracy told himself sourly. *My parents would be dreadfully ashamed to see me in this stupid mess!*

He paused in his thankless task and cast a casual glance over the burnished shield of the sea, not expecting to see anything but the water and the sky. His heart gave a lurch and seemed to go out of rhythm for several beats, and he almost spilled the spare parts from the makeshift tray balanced on his legs.

Jackson's buzzards! This far north, they could mean only one thing—a wolfshark!

With frantic haste he gathered the bits of the fish-finder and thrust them in a bag where at least he could find them again, and scrambled to his feet. There was one other way of tracking oilfish besides using electronic aids, and that was to follow a wolfshark as the buzzards did, until its eagerness for prey led it to a school. It could sense the same nutrient-rich currents as all the other fish, and those currents always defined the oilfish's path.

Of course, not all such currents held oilfish—there were too many such. But it was an idea.

He hesitated, eyes screwed up against the glare, raising the sole of one foot to rub it on the calf of the opposite leg as he always did when concentrating on a problem. There were several factors to weigh before a decision was reached. First off, this wolfshark must be a whopper to have so many buzzards trailing him. Second, he was already four days from home, and a wolfshark finding plenty of prey might kill the clock around for a week before tiring and turning towards the equator again. Third, although he had heard about using a wolfshark as a pilot on the traces of an oilfish school, he had never known anyone really do it—it was needlessly chancy now that everyone sailing from Gratignol could afford a fish-finder.

Finally, if a wolfshark that size decided to attack his trawler, it could probably sink it with two or three fierce charges.

Bracy drew a very deep breath. Now was the time for desperate measures, he concluded, and went to see whether he was equipped for the job.

Stores were no problem, apart from water, and unless the weather broke he could keep the solar still going. Power, likewise—during the day he drew enough to move the boat at a

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sluggish walking pace from silicon-dynide sails spread to catch the sun, and at night he could spare a little of his stored reserves. He could risk a couple of days on the wolfshark's trail.

Defending himself if the beast turned nasty was another matter altogether. His only weapons were two fish-gaffs, rather corroded from long use and one in particular looking likely to snap soon, and an unreliable self-seeking seine, not much use for anything except bringing up jellyfish to be melted in the sun.

One moment. An inspiration struck him. In the emergency locker he had at least half a dozen signal rockets, which on a sparsely populated world like this needed to reach stratospheric altitude if they were to be any use. They weighed sixty-five pounds apiece, and were triggered automatically by contact with sea-water at one-hour intervals after the liferaft was cast overboard.

He spent fifteen sweaty, swearing minutes manhandling two of them into position in the forward rail, and fishing up a bucket of sea-water to fire them with. If luck and judgment combined, he could give even a monster wolfshark a meal worth remembering with these things.

Then, feeling remarkably cold despite the heat of the day, he fed power to the weakly responding reaction jets and the trawler began to creep in the wolfshark's general direction.

HE was about a mile distant when the skimmer came in sight. It seemed to appear from nowhere. It was so low in the water, even the shallow troughs of this oily swell had concealed it until it got up on its planes and spewed a frothy plume astern. There seemed to be nothing of it, too—just a platform with a slightly raised rim forward, and a man lying on it, his face masked with a visor against the sun.

Bracy gulped. Going after the wolfshark—? Yes! For he was lying on the butt of a harpoon-gun, and a gleam of sun caught the barbs of the missile.

He saw the wolfshark then, and wished he hadn't come near after all, for it was gigantic beyond his worst nightmares—its span as great as the entire length of his trawler.

The scene of the man on the skimmer confronting the horrible aquatic killer lasted just long enough to burn into his memory, when the sonic boom thundered across the sky and the tableau, one second old, dissolved into a chaos of spray and shrieking cries from the buzzards, which had withdrawn to a safe height after vomiting their half-digested stomach contents.

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The skimmer vanished as suddenly as it had appeared, in a whirlpool generated by the passage of the wolfshark, and a dozen fragments sailed into the air to land at distances up to a hundred feet away. Of the man who had been on it, Bracy saw nothing more for the moment. Chiefly, this was because he was no longer wasting time on looking. He had stopped his engines on solar power and feverishly switched to stored reserves—not that that would enable him to outrun the monster, but at least it would give him a chance to dodge if he timed the maneuver correctly.

He waited, wholly tense. Would the beast ignore him, or —? No, his luck was out. For, having turned in a lazy circle, it was rising to the surface again and surveying the upper side of the sea.

This was an old rogue, clearly, as well as a monster. No sooner had it sighted the trawler than it had hurled itself forward.

Bracy was yelling at the top of his voice—he had no idea what words he was uttering, but they might have been curses. By crazy guesswork he aligned the trawler on the wolfshark's course, slopped water over the firing mechanism of both rockets, and hurled himself into the well of the deck, hoping the blast would be deflected from him.

One—two—three heartbeats, as widely spaced as measured footfalls, intolerably slow.

And the universe exploded.

Dazed, he picked up his bruised body, feeling as if it belonged to someone else, and put his head over the well's edge to look at the deck. Two of his solar sails were ripped, and the plastic awning which had given him shade had blown clear out of sight; there were char-marks on the planking and the window of the sternhouse was smashed.

But there had been a very satisfactory calamity twenty yards from his bows. He could tell, even before looking over the side, because the buzzards had descended already to replace the food wasted in panicky vomiting.

The writhing corpse of the wolfshark, torn almost in two, was pumping its life's blood in into the ocean.

Limp, Bracy had to cling to the rail—and instantly snatched his hand away. It was still hot from the blaze of the rockets' exhaust. *A miracle I didn't set the ship afire,* he thought wanly.

He looked apathetically at the water. Now he'd lost two solar sails, and his pilot to an oilfish school, for nothing.

He stiffened abruptly. What was that in the water yonder? Something writhing—as though beating at the sky?

The man from the skimmer! Still alive, floating on some buoy-

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ant section of his craft—even having the strength to utter faint cries, now that Bracy's ears were attuned to the sound half-masked by the whinnying of the buzzards.

With infinite effort he put the trawler about and drew alongside the floating man. He was by then too weak to help himself. Bracy had to gaff him through a pair of cross-belts on his back. When he was dragged from the water, he proved to have lost one leg from the knee down to the fangs of the wolfshark.

"Don't—worry," the man whispered, seeing Bracy stare aghast at the injury. "Suit—will stop—the bleeding."

What suit? Bracy peered closer. The man's skin was covered with a transparent film of some kind, that must be it, and it was contracting now of its own accord, forming an automatic tourniquet around the amputated leg so that the flesh turned death-white and the bleeding reduced to a capillary leakage.

Well, that settles it, Bracy thought glumly, and went to get out another signal rocket, this time to cry for help from wherever it might be available.

IV

EVEN on a poor world like Cyclops, the Corps enjoyed the best of everything. It was a necessity to compensate personnel for the often heartbreaking tasks that faced them; likewise, however, it was a drawback in the same way that the pay system based on longevity treatment was, creating envy and troubling Corps selection boards with mobs of totally unsuitable candidates.

Symptomatic of Corps luxury here was Langenschmidt's home and headquarters, a villa crowning the highest point on the island which the Cyclops government leased to them. There was no need for the commandant to be in close physical touch with his responsibilities in the repair-yard and port—electronic links served the purpose and permitted the privacy preferred by a man whose longest service had been on a lonely Patrol beat one tour of which might take a decade.

His dismay at Maddalena's unexpected response to his first remarks after their meeting kept him silent until they were together in the long, low, cool main room of the villa, with the panorama of the island and its offshore pontoons spread like a map in front of the wall-high windows. Then, cradling a drink in both hands, he leaned back in a contoured chair and stared at this woman whom subconsciously he had still regarded an hour ago as the hotheaded stand-in

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agent of the Carrig affair, twenty years previous.

He had grown accustomed to the changes wrought in himself by a return to comfort and civilization—the reversal of the aging effect, for instance. The sight of Maddalena at a "natural" forty-five years of age was a shock to him. Her bones were still fine, her head still as exquisitely shaped as an abstract sculpture, her eyes still bright as gems on either side of her regal nose, sharp as though to symbolize her innate curiosity. But her skin was coarse, her hands were rough, and there was an aura of exhaustion in her attitude and her voice.

To try and dispel the disturbance she had caused in his mind, he said with insincere heartiness, "Well, Maddalena! How have things been going for you since we last met?"

"Badly." She made no move to sip the drink provided for her, although she had taken a dry savory crackerball from a bowl and was rolling it absently between her fingers. "I doubt if it was more than a log book entry for you, but you may remember that Headman Cashus was assassinated soon after my assignment, and with him went any hope of progress. So—"

She crumbled the crackerball into dust and dropped the fragments back in the dish. "So I've spent one hell of a long time watching absolutely nothing happen. And you?"

"Ah—I've been learning a new trade and finding I'm not very good at it. Contemporary diplomacy, I guess you'd say I have not seen *nothing* happen, but on the galactic scale things take place so slowly as to make a fair approximation." Langenschmidt hesitated. "Maddalena, were you serious in what you said earlier, about non-interference, or was that just due to tiredness after your trip?"

"The tiredness has been building up for a long, long time." Now, finally, she tasted her drink, making no comment on it. "And—yes, I'm serious."

"Are you going clear back to the point of view I had such trouble kicking you out of—along with Pavel Brzeska—when we were going to Carrig?"

"No. That was the preconceived notion of a silly girl. It's been a long time, Gus, even for a Corpsman, and I've—changed, I guess."

"Now look here!" Langenschmidt leaned forward. "You've been on Thirteen, which barely counts as Class A, where the refugees have had extremes of climate to contend with, and in any case started off on the worst possible basis by having no adequately trained leaders. I can understand the sight of a primitive

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peasant community getting anybody down. But before you change sides on the question of non-interference, think of Fourteen and Carrig—you should see the recent reports from there, incidentally. Think of Seven, where they're developing some new biological and genetic skills, or Eighteen, where there are some language changes going on which will eventually influence the whole pattern of human communication."

"Think of Five," Maddalena countered. "Unless they've licked the cerebral palsy problem, the survivors there are back to grunting like apes."

THERE was silence for a few minutes. Unhappily, Langenschmidt chewed his lower lip and stared at Maddalena, wondering what next to say.

The problem was a recurrent one, and had been debated for a century and a half. Its roots, though, lay much further back—to be precise, some seven hundred and seventy years before, when the primary of a planet called Zarathustra went nova. For six hundred and thirty years thereafter, it was believed that only a small handful of refugees had escaped—to Baucis Alpha, in the solward direction. Then, without warning, radio signals began to be received from the opposite direction: fruit of generation upon generation of dedicated workers starting from no better level than the salvaged scrap in a single starship, climaxing in the conversion of an asteroid into a huge generating station fed by solar power and oriented to form a bowl-like transmission antenna for messages limping at light-speed back to civilization.

That was ZRP One: the first Zarathustra Refugee Planet to be located and re-contacted. Now, it was part of the galactic union, and regarded as a civilized world.

From there, it had been learned that no less than three thousand ships got away from the night side of Zarathustra, and the far quadrant of its orbit, carrying some two and a quarter million people. The Patrol, constituted a couple of centuries before, was given the task of tracking down the survivors, if any.

Twenty-one worlds had now been found where fugitives had landed. On some, they had not only survived, but built up during their period of isolation quite interesting and respectable cultures. Few of them boasted technology to more than rudimentary level, but some had other achievements—such as those Langenschmidt had cited to Maddalena—which promised new avenues for human cultural or scientific development.

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After much argument and heart-searching, the non-interference rule was formulated and applied. Unless the ZRP's succeeded in re-contacting civilization themselves, they were to be left to evolve along the paths they had themselves created. There were many reasons for this. On some planets there had been evolutionary changes due to environment; on all, there had been cultural disruption and centuries of "natural" breeding, four to five generations per century, had magnified the discontinuity. Perhaps most significant of all, galactic civilization was slowing down its former progress, as though the distance between the stars imposed a psychological as well as physical barrier on cross-fertilization of cultures. Seemingly, one felt there was little point in research or inventiveness when for all one could determine on some other of the 260 human planets the same work had already been carried out.

Left to themselves, it was suggested, the ZRP's might rediscover the basic human drives of curiosity and ultimately re-infect the rest of the race.

Elsewhere, there had been a cultural smoothing process. Worlds like Earth were looked up to, but only the superficialities of fashion spread, not the real changes which underlay them, and consequently things were much the same everywhere as they had been when the Patrol was set up. Backward worlds struggled to catch up to the average standard, and some did so, but the worlds above average were placid and lacked any initiative.

MADDALENA stirred in her chair and raised her eyes to her old friend's rejuvenated face. "Who's spearheading the campaign this time? ZRP One as usual, presumably."

Langenschmidt pounced. "No, and that's the most interesting part of it. It used to be fashionable for One to shout about the shocking way their kinfolk were being left to rot instead of rescued and brought home. But this conservative tradition has died out lately, and I think this is because it's taken until now for One to mesh completely with galactic civilization and discover just how great a change was wrought in their own culture by their isolation period. Now, One's spokesmen are keeping very quiet, and we're hoping they will eventually come down for non-interference themselves.

"In their place, we have Cyclops beating the drum, as a result of the Carrig affair in my personal opinion, and a whole lot of charitably-minded but short-sighted people from the older

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worlds, including and especially Earth. What they fail to understand—I say—is that Earth-type luxury isn't the perfect human way of life. They want to impose it as a standard everywhere, whether or not the recipients enjoy the cultures they have at present, whether or not these cultures are productive, creative ones."

"Thirteen's certainly isn't," Maddalena muttered.

Langenschmidt didn't answer. His eyes had turned towards the window, and widened on seeing a line of brilliant sparks like stitches sewn upward across the blue of the sky.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed. "That's an emergency rocket. Some fisherman in difficulties, presumably. We're always having to nursemaid local folk—either fishermen who go too far to sea with inadequate equipment, or upper-crust playboys out wolfshark-hunting whose nerve fails them at the crucial moment. Still, it interrupts the monotony."

He addressed himself to a communicator panel discreetly blended with the room's no-nonsense decor.

"Anyone taking action on that emergency rocket just now?"

Pause. Then a disembodied voice, sounding irritated, answered him. "Sorry, commandant, what was that?" And, as if re-hearing the question in memory: "Oh! The rocket! Yes, I'll send someone out to gaff the guy and drag him ashore."

"Fine." Langenschmidt's attention reverted to Maddalena. "You know, I think before we finish this argument, I'd better give you a chance to see galactic civilization, Cyclops-style, so that you can learn all over again what a shallow thing it really is. Take the situation here at present as a shining example. We have this woman Alura Quist, who runs things, as I told you. She's certainly very capable and ruthless. But to have to confine her efforts to Cyclops, which is so poor it still runs on fission rather than fusion, galls her. She doesn't see why Corps personnel should enjoy longevity payments, to start with, when she is aging and having to send clear back to Earth for even her cosmetic treatments. I think in fact some of her hostility to us is due to nothing more abstract than simple jealousy. A woman afraid of losing her youthful looks is a sad case. She has an offcial lover, one of the handsomest men I've ever seen, who's also a kind of planetary hero—a former spaceman, who suffered some kind of crippling injury in creditable circumstances. I don't know the full details. She treats him like a tame animal. Shows him off: here he is, the famous Justin Kolb, and he's my lover. Follow me?"

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Maddalena gave a listless nod. She had heard all this, apart from the story of Kolb, at the time of the Carrig affair, when a group of Cyclopean entrepreneurs learned from a failed Corps probationer the location of ZRP Fourteen and its deposits of high-yield radioactives. They had operated a mine with local slave-labor for a considerable time before the Patrol managed to displace them, and Cyclops had smarted ever since under the knowledge that a bunch of ZRP barbarians had dropped civilized men—so-called—down a volcano, the standard punishment for the crimes they had committed by the local ethical yardstick.

"I honestly don't think Quist has any interest in the ZRP's as such," Langenschmidt pursued. "She wants to get back at the Corps for personal reasons of jealousy, and the existence of a fund of hostility due to the episode on Fourteen provides her with a handle. If we were to abandon non-interference for sound, rational reasons, I'd swallow the decision—gagging, maybe, but I'd stomach it. But to do it for such a—"

The disembodied voice spoke again from the communicator. "Commandant?"

"Yes?" Langenschmidt half-turned in his chair.

"I thought you'd be interested to know about that signal rocket."

"Not especially, but tell me anyway."

"We've found one of the Gratignol fishermen—a boy, rather, not more than seventeen, they say. He's tangled with a wolf-shark being hunted by a—uh—rather notorious person. He fished said notorious person out of the water short of most of one leg. Luckily for him, he was wearing a medisuit, and though he's unconscious he isn't dead. But it's who he is which may interest you."

"Well, then, spit it out," Langenschmidt grunted.

"It's Justin Kolb," said the disembodied voice.

V

ALURA QUIST was pleased with the way things were going. Not even the reflection which came back to her from the polyview mirror at which she was preparing for the official banquet due at sunset could wholly dispel the mood of grim satisfaction the offworld delegation had generated in her.

Of course, those from the wealthier worlds such as Earth had felt patronizing about the best Cyclops could offer—but it was out of keeping with their professed charitable intentions towards the underprivileged of the ZRP's to make open complaint, so they had been on their best behavior. And the ferocity

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of the representative from ZRP One—Omar Haust, an old man now but still vehement—out weighted a dozen of his fainter-hearted colleagues.

The banquet would be magnificent; the food and liquor would be so expensive as to have to figure as a special entry in the planetary budget for the year—but never mind, it could appropriately be written off against a one per cent surcharge on the rental of the Corps Galactica base. Afterwards there would have to be speeches, of course—curious how tradition lingered in these formal areas of human activity, even after thousands of years—but she could endure that. In sight of a success schemed for over so many years, she could put up with a couple of hours' repetitious mouthing.

"We of Cyclops," she said to the mirror, and watched how the muscles of her throat moved with the words, "are not among the most prosperous peoples of the galaxy. Yet what we have we do not regard selfishly. We would eagerly share it with those who are still worse off than we. In pregalactic days, the historians tell us, there was a fable recounted about a dog which made its bed on the fodder of a draft-animal and so caused the animal to starve."

She paused, at first because she was still uncertain about including this arcane literary reference even now the speech-compositor had shorn it of obsolete words like "manger" and "ox", and then to carry out yet one more inspection of her appearance.

She was still slender; she had the nervous, energetic constitution which assured her of boniness rather than excess fat in her declining years. Her hair, fair and warmly colored, was impeccably dressed and framed a strong face in which her eyes were blue and brilliant as sapphires. Her gown was of Earthside manufacture—dated, no doubt, in the eyes of the visitors from the mother world, but suiting her so well she could disregard that minority opinion.

How long would it all last? Her mouth twisted into a harsh grimace, instantly destroying her usual prettiness, as the thought of such a man as Gus Langenschmidt crossed her mind. After fifty years patrolling a beat among the ZRP barbarians, he was promised survival in good health and artificial youth when she was long relegated to footnotes in local history records.

That fact could scarcely be changed. But the purpose to which he had dedicated his life could be emptied of meaning.

Oh, the draft of her speech would do well enough. She let that matter drop, and spoke to

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the attendant manicuring her toenails on another subject which was currently worrying her.

"Would you tell Justin Kolb that I wish to speak with him before the banquet?"

"Is he going to be there, mistress?" the girl countered.

Quist started. Was there mockery in that level voice? There was no obvious sign of it in the dark eyes which met hers; she relaxed fractionally.

"What do you mean? Of course he will be there. Why not?"

"I understood from his valet, mistress, that he had not returned half an hour ago."

"Returned?" Bewildered, Quist stared down at the girl. In the past two days, since the arrival of the offworld delegates, she had spared scarcely a moment to think of her lover. She had been vaguely aware that he had gone off somewhere, but had assumed without question that he would be back for tonight's major official function.

She slapped the old-fashioned communicator built into her dressing-table and spoke to the air. "Has Justin Kolb come home yet?"

"I am his valet, mistress," a suave voice replied. "No, he has not yet returned."

"Where is he, then? Has there been a message?"

"No message, mistress. If you wish, I will attempt to contact him."

"Do you know where he is?" Belatedly, it struck Quist as bad for her image not to know herself, but she could hardly recall the words once spoken.

"Approximately, mistress. He went wolfshark-hunting at the extreme northern limit of the species' range."

Time seemed to stand still. Finally, her voice ragged, she whispered, "Contact him and find out—find out when he will be back."

And when he does come home, she finished silently, *I'll teach him a lesson he'll never forget for his impudence in disregarding my orders to be here tonight.*

IN fact, it might well be time to dispense with Justin Kolb—send him back to the menial job where but for her he would now be slaving out his miserable existence, one leg reduced to a stump by the freezing cold of space. Cyclops had no slack in its economy to allow for the luxury of unproductive cripples.

She was making alterations to the seating arrangements for the banquet when the communicator sounded again. Was it Justin calling? She closed her eyes for a second, wondering how she could bring herself to get rid of this man whose half-tamed spirit represented the second most con-

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stant challenge of her life.

"Mistress, it is I once more," the valet said. "I have bad news, I regret to say."

She could not speak, but waited passively. The girl completed her toe-manicure and gathered her equipment to move away.

"Justin Kolb is in hospital at the Corps Galactica base. He was attacked by the wolfshark he was hunting and a fisherman rescued him. He will live, they say, but—" The valet hesitated.

"Go on," she said in a dead voice. The next of her attendants, charged with fitting her shoes, came and knelt at her feet.

"He has lost the lower part of his right leg, and the foot, to the wolfshark's bite."

Does the madman *want* to be a cripple? The question sped across her mind, and then was replaced by an uncontrollable wave of pity and sympathy. But for tonight's banquet, she would have jumped up that moment and gone to his hospital bed, to hold his hand and croon comfort.

Oh, Justin, Justin! What's the love of danger that you draw your fire from? One day it will kill you, and I shall instantly be made old . . .

Aloud, she spoke with determination. "Get me in touch with him. At once!"

"I will try, mistress," was the doubtful answer.

All thought of the recriminations she was going to level at her lover had evaporated on this news. She could visualize the way he would have brought her his trophy, defiant because he knew it offended her when he courted danger, yet in some ways shy, too—like a boy uncertainly seeking the praise of his first girl. He would have intended to return for the banquet, had the accident not overtaken him, bringing his tribute, and she would have been both angry and delighted, for knowledge that such a man was her lover comforted her.

The communicator spoke once more. "Alura Quist?" it said, and she recognized the voice.

"Commandant Langenschmidt," she said coldly. "I did not ask to speak to you."

"No, but I thought you'd rather speak to me than nobody at all. Justin Kolb won't regain consciousness for some while—at least a couple of hours. He was severely shocked by his experience. But you can have him back tomorrow or the day after, the doctors say."

"With his leg restored?"

There was a blank pause. Then Langenschmidt gave a forced chuckle. "Hardly, I'm afraid. Some people seem to have exaggerated ideas of what our medicine can accomplish. Limb-regeneration overnight isn't among our capabilities."

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She had expected no other answer, but she had been unable to prevent the words from emerging—they were driven by the savage jealousy she felt towards the Corpsman for his payment in youth and health.

No matter, anyhow. Justin had lost that leg before, and more than simply the foot and lower part—the whole of it, almost all the way to the hip, from space-gangrene.

"Thank you for your courtesy in telling me," she said without warmth. "I'd have appreciated earlier notification, of course."

"It was my belief that you had other things to occupy your mind," Langenschmidt countered mildly.

With a snarl which made her glad communicator links on Cyclops were restricted to sound without vision, Quist forced herself to maintain calm. She said, "I will have transport sent in the morning, to bring him home. Will that be convenient?"

"I imagine so, but send a doctor as well, of course." Langenschmidt sounded a trifle surprised, as though he had expected an attempt to persuade him that Kolb's leg should be restored at the Corps hospital.

"Of course," Quist echoed, and silenced the communicator.

She waited a second. Then she spoke to it again. "Find me Dr Aleazar Rimerley, quickly."

DR. Rimerley was enjoying the sunset when the call came. He was among the wealthiest men on Cyclops, and his home consisted of the surface and the heart of an entire island, some mile or so in circumference. His living quarters were built out into the ocean, so that when he chose—as now—he could sit on a higher level and watch the sky, or else he could move down to the seabed and enjoy the vivid panorama of the ocean's summer life.

His chief personal servant brought news of the call. He rubbed his chin in wonder; he had not been intending to get in contact with Quist again just yet, but a further deal was certain once simple cosmetic treatment ceased to stave off time's ravages. Now, therefore, was as good a time as any to talk to her, since she had initiated the conversation.

He smiled automatically even though she could not see him, and said with extreme heartiness, "My dear Alura Quist! What an honor to speak with you after all this time!"

She brushed aside the social formalities and went straight to the point.

"Doctor, I have another job for you. As far as I know, you're the only person on Cyclops capable of tackling it."

"I'll do my best," Rimerley agreed, and repressed a smile

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that was more sincere than the original one.

"Justin Kolb has lost his leg again. Wolfshark-hunting."

Rimerley blinked. He had expected something altogether different, almost certainly for Quist herself. This request took him aback.

"I'm having him brought to you tomorrow morning. I count on you to do as thorough a job of regeneration as you did the last time."

"Ah—just a moment," Rimerley said uncomfortably. "It's not the sort of job that can be tackled on a few hours' notice, you understand." In the back of his mind he was running calculations: so long to locate material, so long to make the tissue immunologically neutral, so long to get it here. "I doubt whether it would be possible to handle the case in less than two weeks, I'm afraid."

"Two weeks!"

"That's my rough estimate. Of course, I may be—"

"Then I might just as well leave him where he is. He'll be better looked after than in one of our second-rate hospitals."

A warning tremor ran down Rimerley's spine. He said in a voice suddenly fainter than normal, "Ah—where is he, then?"

"In the Corps Galactica hospital. He was taken there by some fisherman who rescued him from the water."

The Doctor maintained silence.

"Dr. Rimerley?" Quist demanded at last, sounding alarmed.

She was not half as alarmed as Rimerley himself. He could barely choke out his answer.

"Oh—uh—on second thoughts, perhaps it would be better to have him brought here. At once, the sooner the better." He gulped the rest of the drink he had been sipping while he relaxed for the evening. "Yes, certainly not later than tomorrow morning, on any account!"

He was sweating like a river when he cut the connection.

VI

SORAYA was working as usual at the waterworks, and having the inevitable argument with Firdausi about marrying him, which he had been urging on her ever since she achieved puberty, when she heard her name being frantically shouted.

She motioned Firdausi to be silent, and peered through the wraiths of steam from the main cauldron, trying to make out who it was. The voice was a child's, but so hoarse with agitation she could not recognize its owner.

The waterworks consisted of three parts. First, there was the dipper which brought water from the natural pool; this was a chain of buckets on two big

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wooden pulleys, driven by a yorb which seemed quite content to walk around all day in a circle and get an evening reward of food for its trouble. The dipper emptied its water into the main cauldron, under which a hot fire burned all the time, raising sluggishly bursting bubbles in the contents. Although the water seemed perfectly clear and pure when it was raised from the pool, a scum always formed during boiling, and it was in removing this scum with wooden ladles that Soraya and Firdausi were engaged.

Then the water was run off, a little at a time, into the cooling tank, a tapered cylindrical container of heavy stones mortared with natural cement, whence the townsfolk could fetch it in bucketfuls for use at home.

"Can you see who it is?" Soraya demanded.

Firdausi clambered down from the ladder on which they were working, to get below the clouds of steam, and reported. "It looks like the youngest from next door to you—Baby Hakim."

"Oh *no!*" Soraya gulped, and dropped to the ground with a lithe flexing of her long legs. Firdausi's eyes followed her hungrily. She was by far the most beautiful unmarried girl in the whole town: sloe-eyed, olive-skinned, with long dark hair and supple, graceful limbs. He wished achingly that his parents were not so concerned with mundanities like a dowry and would give him permission to marry her anyway. He was sure she would make an excellent wife.

"Hakim baby!" she cried, dropping on her knees and sweeping her arms around the tearful youngster who came charging up to her. "What's wrong?"

Between sobs of exhaustion and terror, the child forced out the news: Soraya's mother had been taken ill yet again.

"You go straight home," Firdausi instructed. "I'll bring Marouz to you there."

She shot him a smile of gratitude and went racing back to the town.

It consisted of two rows of wattle-and-daub houses facing one another, widely spaced, with large vegetable gardens and runs for livestock surrounding them. Tethered yorbs regarded her incuriously as she sped past, feet splashing in puddles left by the overnight rain which the sky threatened to let flood down again at any moment. In the fifth house from the left was her home; she slammed back the crude wooden gate in the fence enclosing its garden, and ran indoors.

Hakim's elder sister, Yana, was bending over the bed on which lay the wheezing form of apparently an old woman. In

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truth, Soraya's mother was no more than thirty-seven, but in this harsh environment age descended with the swiftness of tropical night.

And yet it was not mere age—endurable, because visited on everyone—which afflicted her. It was something random, and more deadly. There was a name for it: the quakes. But simply to have a name was no help. What was needed was a cure.

Sick with despair, Soraya glanced at Yana. "Has she been like this long?"

"I found her on the floor by the hearth," the other girl answered in low tones. "See, her dress is scorched—it was lucky I chanced to look in, or she might have been burned to death."

Soraya shuddered. "When? Just now?"

"So long ago as it took Hakim to reach you," Yana shrugged. "I sent him at once."

Soraya clutched her mother's hand, feeling the uncontrollable trembling that racked her weak body, and railed mentally against the capriciousness of fate.

"Shall I go for Marouz?" Yana suggested.

"Thank you, but Firdausi was with me at the waterworks, and he has gone already. Not that he'll be any help," Soraya added bitterly.

"You shouldn't talk so. He's the wisest man among us as well as the oldest!" Yana sounded horrified.

"What use is wisdom without practical applications? He can tell us to be dutiful children and loving parents, and we do our best—and my mother who is the kindest of women has the quakes." Soraya put up her hand to wipe away a tear.

"Sssh! He's coming now,"

Yana murmured, and turned to bow as Marouz dipped his white-bearded head under the low lintel.

"Honor and profit upon this house," the mage said in a single rapid burst, and limped to a chair which Yana brought up beside the bed. "Hmmm! Has your mother drunk unboiled water, Soraya?"

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"You think I would let her?" Soraya jumped to her feet, appalled. "I, who work where I do? What do you take me for?"

"Soraya, that's unwise," Firdausi said softly; he had come in just behind Marouz, holding Baby Hakim's chubby hand.

"I don't care!" Tears were gathering in Soraya's eyes also now. "I don't care! My mother lies sick to death, and all he can think of is that she might have drunk unboiled water! What has water to do with it, anyway? My father tended the waterworks before me, and he'd never have let her do such a thing, and I wouldn't—and *still* she has the quakes! What can water possibly have to do with it?"

MAROUZ'S face went hard as stone. "We are taught by the wisdom of the ancients—" he began.

"And a fat lot of good it does us!" Soraya blazed. But on the last word she collapsed to her knees before him, her shoulders heaving in helpless sobs.

"There, there," Marouz said, giving her an awkward pat on top of the head. "These things are sent to try us, daughter. We do what we can, but we are still far from understanding all life's mysteries. When you grow as old as I—which may you do!—you'll have learned patience with the inescapable."

"I'm sorry," Soraya choked out. "But I love my mother, and she's done so much for me . . . Is there no help you can give?"

"Spiritual comfort I would offer, but I know your mother as a fine, noble-hearted woman in small need of my advice." Marouz waggled his flowing beard regretfully. "The only counsel I can give is to you. And you know what that is, for I've suggested it before."

"I've urged it on her also," Firdausi put in. "And she won't listen."

"Take my mother away from her own home, and send her who knows where?" Soraya exclaimed. "It seems to me so—so heartless!"

"Now, now, my daughter," Marouz soothed. "We all hate necessity, but that's no use. The Receivers of the Sick are good men, full of ancient wisdom and kindly intentions. Is it not better to see your mother in safe keeping than lying here quivering her life away on this narrow hard bed?"

There was silence after that blunt question, until at last Marouz stirred. "Well, I can do no more than I've done," he said, and reached for Yana's arm to get to his feet. "Make your mind up quickly, Soraya—the Receivers are coming to this area in a few days' time, I hear, and they won't be back for months, at least."

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He hobbled out, and automatically they threw good wishes after him in the form traditional for very old persons—"May good health attend you to your grave!"

Firdausi caught Yana's eye and she took the hint. Crossing the dirt floor to retrieve her young brother, she said in a strained voice, "Well, I have things to see to next door. I guess you'd like to be alone."

The moment she was out of sight, Firdausi put his arm around Soraya. "Dearest, why do you torture yourself—and your mother—this way?"

She shook off his grip and took the chair Marouz had vacated, to sit gazing down at her mother, fingers driving their nails deep into her palms as though to share her mother's suffering by self-inflicted pain.

"Shall I sell her like a yorb?" she snapped. "You know as I do that but for the payment we'd never have let a single person go from this town to the Receivers! It may be well enough for towns where they don't teach love for one's parents, but it disgusts me."

"Can you do more for her than the Receivers?" Firdausi countered.

"What do they do?" Soraya demanded. "No one will tell me that! What becomes of those committed to their mercies?"

"You should ask Marouz."

"I did, the first time he made this suggestion. And he could only say that he didn't doubt—'didn't doubt'!—that their fate was better than we ignorant folk could offer."

"Wouldn't almost anything be better than this?" Firdausi argued. "Lying helpless among others equally helpless?"

He dropped to his knees, face pleading. "I admire you for your wish to keep your mother with you, believe me! But looking at her, knowing there's nothing we can do—how can you condemn her to it any longer? Look, why don't you ask her views when she's able to talk again?"

Soraya's face was very pale as she murmured, "I did."

"What did she say?" Firdausi pressed.

"That the payment—if the Receivers accept her—would be dowry for me and I could marry you and inherit the house." She formed the words as though each tasted bad in her mouth.

"But in that case—!" Firdausi rocked back on his heels. "If it's her own wish, what holds you back?"

"They might not accept her," Soraya whispered. "They don't take everyone, do they?"

"But it's a chance, don't you see? What chance has she here of any other fate but a lingering, unpleasant death?"

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Soraya delayed her answer for long moments. Finally she said, "Firdausi, all you care about is freeing me to marry you. Suppose I say that if—*if*—I take my mother to the Receivers, this does not mean I intend to marry you."

It was Firdausi's turn to hesitate.

"I think," he said slowly, "that the way you're keeping your mother here, suffering needlessly, is likely to make me less eager to have you for my wife."

She flinched as though from a physical blow, and fresh tears gathered in her eyes. Seeing his advantage, Firdausi pressed it.

"There's something almost selfish about it. You've just told me what her own desires are, yet you insist on going against them. If that's not pandering to your own self-esteem, I don't know what is."

She bit down on her lower lip to stop it quivering, and was only able to speak after a further pause. The words came like leaden footfalls.

"Very well. Go to Marouz and find out when the Receivers are due, and where. And I'll try and borrow a wagon and a yorb to take her."

Firdausi's jubilation showed in his face, although his voice was sober as he said, "I do think it's the wisest course."

He turned and went out.

So I'll do it, Soraya thought bitterly. *But I won't marry you or anyone else in this horrible town. If they take her, I'll burn the house and use the pay to go somewhere I can hide from my shame.*

Abruptly she turned to the water-bucket and began to rinse her hands, over and over, as though to remove some clinging invisible foulness.

VII

MADDALENA and Langenschmidt took their evening meal together in the main base restaurant. Under the influence of the nearest approach to civilized luxury she had enjoyed for many years—the Corps base where she had been most recently was as spartan as any of the other outlying stations—Maddalena's mood of exhaustion and apathy faded. The music, food and wine made her expand like a flower to the sun, so that even before she took the course of cosmetic treatment she was due for traces of the impetuous girl Langenschmidt had formerly known began to peek through.

Unfortunately, it was his turn to become distracted and stare for long silent periods into nowhere. It was some while before Maddalena noticed the fact—she had been gossiping about her

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experiences on ZRP Thirteen—and when she did, she spoke teasingly to him.

"Why, Gus! Is this any way to treat a guest? I thought you'd spent your time here learning all the correct social behavior!"

"Hm?" He snapped back to the present with a start. "Oh, I'm sorry. There's something bothering me, and I think I just figured out what it has to be. Would you excuse me for a few minutes? I have to check on it.

Maddalena stared at him. Suddenly she leaned forward and put her hand on his. "I'm sorry, Gus. I didn't intend to act this way on seeing you for the first time in so many years. You do have problems to handle, and I shouldn't be disregarding them the way I have been."

"No, this is nothing directly to do with you. At least I don't believe it is. Would you excuse me?"

"Is it something I'm not allowed to know about, or may I come with you?"

"Sure, come if you like. I'm not going far. To a communicator first, then to the hospital if my suspicions prove correct."

"Something about this man Justin Kolb?"

"Very much so."

She pushed back her chair and rose.

* * *

The network of communicator links knitted the base together as intimately as the nerves in a living body, so that none of the key personnel need ever be out of reach in the rare event of an emergency. Here, Maddalena thought as she studied Langenschmidt's strong profile against the wall of the restaurant communicator booth, emergencies would be even less common than on most Corps bases. He must make a first-class commandant: thorough, farsighted, and patient.

But he had been a first-class Patrol Major, too, and would have been equally efficient as an on-planet agent like herself—had stood in as one during the Carrig crisis, and proved that.

She sighed imperceptibly, envying his adaptability and dedication. By comparison she felt herself pliable, weak and self-centered.

The signal indicating access to the base computer memory shone out of the screen in the booth—the Corps was the only regular user of vision circuits on Cyclops apart from the government.

"Justin Kolb, Cyclopean," Langenschmidt said briskly. "Circumstances attending his retirement from the Cyclops space service, please."

The last word tickled Maddalena's fancy. Imagine saying "please" to a machine! But after

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a second it didn't seem funny —only characteristic of the man who uttered it.

"Select auditory or visual presentation," the machine requested, and he selected sound, thinking it was more convenient for Maddalena, who had to peer into the booth from outside.

The machine spoke dates keyed to an unfamiliar calendar, and continued. "Kolb, Justin. Asteroid mining engineer, spaceman. Second in command of local system mine-ship *Sigma*. Awarded Medal of Cyclops for heroism following accidental destruction of *Sigma* with loss of captain and fifteen crew. Sustained space-gangrene of right leg to mid-thigh, resulting in permanent retirement from space service. More?"

The gently questioning tone of the last word was a marvel of sophisticated engineering, if you thought about it, Maddalena informed herself absently. What was Gus driving at?

"Who was responsible for regenerating his leg?" Langenschmidt demanded.

"No information specific to this question," the machine answered.

"Damn. Uh—what doctor was in charge of his case and supervised his eventual recovery?"

"Dr. Aleazar Rimerley," the machine said.

"Thought it might have been," Langenschmidt muttered, and made as though to turn away. He hesitated, and at length voiced another question.

"What facilities exist on Cyclops for the major regeneration of human limbs?"

"The hospital at the Corps Galactica base is fully equipped for limb-regeneration."

"Are there no other facilities for the job here?"

"No information," the machine said after a pause.

"Ve-ery interesting," Langenschmidt said, and shut the communicator off. "Come on!" he added to Maddalena. "We're going down to the hospital. Are you with me so far?"

"His right leg—both times, including today?"

"You're not stupid, are you?" Langenschmidt said affectionately, and put his arm through hers to lead her away.

"I think you're glad to see me in spite of what I said earlier," she murmured when they had gone a short distance.

"Hm? Oh, of course I am!"

"You *have* learned the socially correct things here!" she snapped, and withdrew her arm.

HE seemed still to be puzzling over that crack when they reached the hospital and were shown into the presence of a tall, brown-bearded man in self-sterilizing whites.

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"This is Dr. Anstey Nole, our senior medical officer," Langenschmidt told Maddalena in passing. "Doc! It's about this Justin Kolb. How is he?"

"As well as you'd expect, seeing he's lost half his right calf and the foot, endured a medisuit tourniquet for long enough to starve the tissues of blood, and been frightened nearly out of his wits by that wolfshark. Not to mention almost being blown to pieces when this fisher-kid let go his rockets."

"What? I saw one of the rockets go up myself—seemed to work perfectly." Langenschmidt blinked.

"Oh, not the one he used to call for help. Didn't they tell you how he dealt with the wolfshark? Set up two of these damned great fireworks on the foredeck of his trawler and let them go pointblank. Tore the wolfshark to ribbons, I gather. Quite a bright kid, I can tell you. He's in here too, being treated for malnutrition, incipient lupus and minor burns sustained when he let the rockets go. Lost half his hair."

"Lupus?" Maddalena put in inquiringly.

"Strictly that's incorrect, I grant you, but it's the term we apply. A skin disease common among the fisherfolk—they get it from overexposure to sunlight and the irritants secreted by oilfish scales. Life on a backward world like this is a pretty unpleasant business sometimes. Sorry to have brought the subject up." Nole looked uncomfortable.

"You don't have to tell me," Maddalena snapped. "I just completed a twenty-year tour on a ZRP."

Nole looked still more uncomfortable and changed the subject hastily.

"Matter of fact, as soon as he recovers I mean to send this kid to see you, commandant. His name's Bracy Dyge, by the way. Says he wants to be considered for Corps membership. I laughed at him at first, frankly. Then I thought it over, and finally decided: hell, he has initiative, anyway!"

"Every waterfront on the planet is swarming with kids who think they want to join the Corps," Langenschmidt said cynically. "I'm surprised at you, doc. It's the pay they're after."

"He doesn't know about the pay," the doctor said. "At least, I don't think he can."

"What? Of course he must! Everybody—"

Nole interrupted firmly. "No, all the time we were talking it was never mentioned. He just wants to be able to support his family—parents are both dead—some better way than by chasing oilfish. His fish-finder has been

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out of order, and . . . I asked for it to be seen to in our workshops, by the way. Hope you've no objection. It seemed like the least we—"

"Hell, I didn't come down here to talk about this—this Bracy Dyge!" exclaimed Langenschmit. "I came to talk about Kolb. In particular, about Kolb's leg."

Nole shrugged. "I've told you all I can, I guess."

"Wrong. You haven't started. You didn't even mention that he'd lost it before."

It was Nole's turn to be astonished. "Nobody told me so! Are you sure about that? Why, it *looked* like a natural leg—what was left of it—when I examined him earlier."

"You wouldn't expect it to look like a false one, would you? Does the name of Dr. Aleazar Rimerley mean anything to you?"

"No, I don't believe so. A local sawbones, perhaps?"

"You could call him that. The most successful doctor on Cyclops—has been retained by Quist at least once. Would he be able to regenerate Kolb's leg?"

Nole pursed his lips and looked dubious. "Just possibly. Regeneration of a leg—ah—yes, with half a megabrain computer capacity you could do a fair job from the knee down. It is conceivable, but I didn't realize Cyclops could afford medical computers on this scale."

"This wasn't for a knee-down job. This was from mid-thigh."

"Then I don't believe it," Nole said. "You'd need a full megabrain, and at that the job might not come off." He gave Maddalena an apologetic glance, as though fearing this was distasteful to her. "It's the joint, you see—especially the synovial membranes. Very tricky to program well."

"What are you standing there for?" Langenschmidt inquired sweetly. "Has, or has not, Justin Kolb two functioning knees?" Nole made a wordless noise and and spun on his heel.

MADDALENA sat down on the corner of a nearby table and stared at Langenschmidt.

"I don't quite see the significance of this," she ventured. "There are places where regeneration is available, and if this man Kolb is the—uh—accepted lover of Alura Quist, could she not have pulled strings to have him treated on some more advanced planet?"

"If she had done so, the memory bank would have mentioned it." Langenschmidt began to pace the room. "It didn't. It gave me an unequivocal answer when I asked who was responsible for Kolb's eventual recovery—it named a Cyclopean doctor, who's

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probably very good in his limited sphere, but simply hasn't got access to the medical computer capacity needed for regeneration."

Maddalena paled. "But what alternative treatment could he have offered? Kolb did regain his leg, didn't he? Nole might have overlooked the fact that the limb wasn't an original, but he could not have overlooked a prosthetic!"

"Exactly," Langenschmidt muttered, and fell silent.

* * *

They waited, neither saying anything, for twenty minutes before Nole returned, his face pale above his full brown beard.

"I don't know what put you on to this, commandant," he began, "and equally I don't know how I came to miss—"

"Save the apologies. What have you found now you have looked?"

"His right leg isn't his own. It's not regenerated is what I mean—regeneration counts as own-tissue substance." Nole combed his beard with agitated fingers. "That leaves one possibility. It's a graft. An exceptionally good one, what's more—it must have been selected most carefully to make a pair with the left leg. Well, of course, the moment I discovered this I took a cell-sample and processed it for genetic structure, and I've come up with the most alarming result."

Langenschmidt's face was quite calm, as though he had already worked out what revelation Nole had brought them. He said merely, "Go on."

"Well, it's hard to be absolutely certain, but I'd say on the basis of what I've just seen that the leg's not merely not his own—it's also not Cyclopean in origin. At any rate, the particular gene-structure of the cells I processed has never been recorded on Cyclops."

"Can you tell me where it is from?" Langenschmidt snapped.

"I've set the computers to search, but there may not be a definite reading." Nole combed his beard again. "Commandant, this is the most extraordinary thing I ever heard of!"

VIII

THE screen of the subspace communicator lit. The venture was a profitable one; they had become able to allow themselves such refinements as interstellar vision circuits. It showed a man with a face as cruelly beaked as a Jackson's buzzard, clad in the decent black robe of a Receiver of the Sick, with the hood thrown back on his shoulders. His hair was greying but still luxuriant, and

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his face was lined more by reflected concentration than by the passage of time.

This was Lors Heimdall, on whom Rimerley was totally dependent.

"What is it?" he grunted, eyes scanning the image of the doctor confronting him. Vaguely in the background could be seen the interior of his headquarters, with a rack of robes hanging like dead bats on the wall, a videograph playing over a recording of some music-drama or other.

If he can't read the crisis straight off my face, Rimerley thought, *I must be over the worst of the shock.*

Indeed, he felt considerably better than he had done when he finished speaking to Quist. As well as taking another stiff drink, he had given himself a shot of mixed tranquilizers and mind-keeners, a blend which he usually only relied on when making the preparations for a major operation. But this affair, of course, might turn out to be a major operation in its own way . . .

"Two things," he said crisply. "Sorry to disturb you, by the way, but you'll see the urgency when I tell you the background. Did I interrupt anything?"

"No, it's early morning here, half an hour past dawn. We weren't ready to move off yet." Heimdall was doubtless impatient, but his voice was deceptively affable.

"Where are you at present?"

"Working south from Idiot's Head towards Encampment Hills. Am I to take it you have a special order for us?"

Rimerley nodded. "A- double. First off how would you like to do a favor for Justin Kolb?"

"Another?" Heimdall said acidly. "The fellow has had too many breaks in life already. True, but for his incompetence I wouldn't be where I am now—but I've settled that score, and I'd rather not know. Cosmos, he wasn't even a moderately capable spaceman—just a hothead with a specious brand of charm—and they made him a hero. Or rather, Quist did." He scowled. "Okay. What sort of a favor?"

Rimerley had to wipe away a trace of itching sweat. "Hot here—full summer," he muttered in explanation to Heimdall. "Well, as a matter of fact he's lost his leg again. To a wolfshark this time. The same leg."

"And Quist no doubt wants her tame monkey cured," Heimdall agreed briskly. "Also we must fill the order quickly to keep her sweet against the day when she becomes our biggest client. We have the specifications on record, so it should be fairly easy. Yes?"

"Not altogether," Rimerley muttered. "I mean, that part of

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it is. But what's resulted from his encounter with the wolfshark isn't so cheerful. He was rescued by some ignorant fisherman and taken to the Corps Galactica hospital—it was the nearest point from which help could get to him, I suppose."

Heimdall's face darkened like the sky before a thunderstorm. "In that case, we're leaving here at once! I want to be on some good and distant planet before the pan boils over, with a change of name and a change of identitraces!"

"Wait!" Rimerley instructed in a soothing tone. "All is not lost, you know. I told Quist to get her boy-friend out of there tomorrow morning at the latest, and bring him to me. There's an excellent chance they won't be interested enough in Cyclopean scandal to know Kolb's history—there's little contact between the Corps and the Cyclopeans, as you well know."

"Any at all is too much for me," Heimdall scowled. "How about the genetic pattern of the graft, though?"

"Why should it occur to them to check it?" Rimerley countered. "If they don't know Kolb's story, they'll assume it's his original leg—the match was eye-perfect, remember. Didn't I give you hell finding the exact match, and reject who knows how many faulty samples first?"

Heimdall nodded, but looked worried even so. Rimerley plunged on.

"Even if they do know his story, they'll most likely take it for a regenerated limb. After all, if he's Quist's lover, who would be more likely to afford the journey offworld to somewhere he could find that standard of medical computation? The only thing which would make them stumble on the unmatched genetic pattern would be if they attempted a fresh regeneration themselves, and cross-checked to the left leg."

"Might they not do that?" Heimdall suggested. "It's an open secret that Quist has no love for them, and would discontinue their lease of the island they use if she could. It might occur to them to fix up Kolb to sweeten her a little. A sort of bribe."

"If that were their intention," Rimerley said with exaggerated confidence, "she wouldn't have offered, of her own accord, to have him brought here tomorrow morning, would she? She'd never have bothered to get in touch with me at all, in fact."

"No, I guess that figures," conceded Heimdall.

"And besides," Rimerley pursued, leaning closer to the screen, "we are the ones who are going to offer Quist a bribe. A bribe she couldn't possibly re-

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fuse, even if the price were something very helpful to us, like—let's say—ordering the Corps to abandon their base on Cyclops with immediate effect. That should give them enough to occupy them without worrying about Justin Kolb's leg!"

A spark gleamed in Heimdall's eyes. He said, "If you can pull a trick like that to divert the storm, you're cleverer than I thought you were. How will you organize it?"

"Like this," Rimerley said, and began to explain.

THE banquet had passed tolerably swiftly, but the speeches afterwards were dragging on to all eternity. Alura Quist had given up listening to the actual words a quarter-hour earlier, and was lost in a maze of private contemplation.

Every now and again her eyes strayed to the seat, occupied by the senior representative of the participants from Earth, which should have been Justin's tonight.

I feel horribly old, she told herself. *And if anyone cares to peer closely enough at me, more than likely I look old. And when I die, what will stand to my memory other than a weather-worn gravestone and some dates in my career which no one off Cyclops will learn in school?*

Even the long-schemed-for plan to overset the Corps' prized principle of non-interference with ZRP's was sour to the taste now, as she contemplated the old man at her right: Omar Haust, from ZRP One, honored by being seated next to her because he was the only person present whose ancestors had had to endure the mud-grubbing existence of a refugee planet.

And he was disgracing himself.

He had drunk too much, to start with. At the commencement of the evening he had looked ascetic, almost saintly, with his fierce white moustache fringing his upper lip, his halo-like white hair circling his shiny bald pate. But he had continued to drink heavily; for the later courses, he had insisted on waving aside cutlery and eating with his fingers, as a sort of gesture of solidarity with those on the ZRP's who were denied any other implements. Twice his hand, made greasy with the food, let fall full goblets of liquor that splashed all over his seat-neighbors—including Quist, whose prized Earth-made gown was now spattered with dark stains. And for the past several minutes, during the speech by the senior Earth delegate, he had been muttering insulting remarks in his own mother-tongue, a divergent offshoot of the common Galactic

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language which was still sufficiently close for Quist to have flinched at what she half-understood.

Since letting herself drift off into her private worries, however, she had paid no more attention.

Suddenly she was snatched out of a mingled kaleidoscope of self-pity and optimism, in which Justin Kolb figured very frequently, to realize that the old man's patience was at an end. He was on his feet, hammering with the base of his goblet on the table, and every blow splashed fresh gouts of liquor far and wide. The delegate delivering the current speech broke off in horror as Haust bellowed in his thick accent.

"It makes me sick! It makes me want to vomit! Here's all this fine talk about our poor miserable brothers and sisters out on the refugee planets, which we're forbidden to liberate and bring back to the fold of civilization—and who's spewing out these platitudes? Hm? Who's mouthing these pious nothings about what we ought to do?"

Aghast, the assembled company of notables looked elsewhere for some less embarrassing spectacle than the aged drunkard, slobbering down his chin.

"I'll tell you!" he roared. "A gang of dirty lying hypocrites! That's what you all are! Look at you!" He hurled his goblet in the general direction of the speaker from Earth, a mild-mannered woman of ninety or a hundred with a distinguished political record on her home world; fortunately the missile sailed wide of her.

"Look at you!" Haust repeated. "With the rolls of Earthside fat wobbling around your middle! And all the rest of you, the same. As for *you*—"

He rounded on Quist, who shrank back in her chair. Alarmed attendants moved close, uncertain whether to try and restrain Haust or wait till he actually struck their mistress. She was frozen and could offer them no clue for guidance.

"You're as bad as the rest!" the old man raved. "Who keeps the ZRP's in subju—subju'ation? The Corps stinking Galactica, that's who, and their whining lackeys in the Patrol! And who leases a base right here on Cyclosh—Shyclops—right on this filthy world whatever its name is!—to the triply damned Corps? Why, *you* do! Aargh! Give me some more drink to wash away the taste of you!"

He snatched at the nearest goblet, which happened to be Quist's own, and as he made to raise it to his lips lost his precarious grip on stability and went crashing to the floor.

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I AM sure," said the next speaker, "we ought to learn a lesson from what too many of us took simply as a disgusting exhibition." He was a lean man from the twin worlds of Alpha and Beta Lobulae, which having been blessed with few internal troubles had much surplus energy for meddling in those of other systems. "It should have reminded us all that we are not dealing with abstracts, but with human beings, with a capacity to suffer, and suffer more greatly than we fortunate children of happier worlds can know. Indeed, it comes as no great surprise to me to realize that Omar Haust feels himself unnecessarily mocked by the presence of the Corps Galactica base on this planet—whose hospitality and whose government's sympathy with our aims I do not question, but whose action in this respect perhaps casts doubt in the minds of waverers on our ultimate determination."

That, Quist realized with a sinking heart, called for a reply. And it would be useless to state the truth—that but for the income the leasing of that island to the Corps brought to Cyclops, the delegates would not be here; the revenue tipped the balance between Cyclops affording and not affording an interstellar fleet, small though it had to be.

She rose and looked around. She could use the opening of her original speech, she decided, and began on it—the compositor had worked well, and it soon had the delegates listening in calm self-approval, bar the man from Lobulae.

To him, finally, she said with an air of desperation, "It must of course be recalled that in the days when the agreement between my—*our* government and the Corps was reached, the first of the ZRP's had not yet been chanced upon. Far be it from me to decry the useful work the Corps has done, in its capacity as the interstellar counterpart to a police force. It seems only to be in the area of framing policy that they have exceeded their intended brief."

Nods to that.

"However, we are grateful for the suggestion. I'll have the proposal investigated, and if on balance it does appear that such an action would be an effective lever in securing our aims against the opposition of the Corps, I will make a formal statement to that effect."

Applause. She sat down, wishing with all her heart that Justin were here to smile his praise on her, forced though she knew it to be.

Heaven help Cyclops if I have to act on that vaporous promise, she thought grimly, and turned to smile sweetly at those dele-

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gates who were complimenting her on what she had said.

IX

NOLE had gone off again, still in a state of agitation, to see whether there was a print-out from the computer which he had set to tracking the gene-type of the tissue in Kolb's leg-graft.

It was very quiet in the office where Maddalena and Langenschmidt waited for news. The hospital hummed with the same soft efficient noise as an advanced automatic factory; since its business was the repair and maintenance of what were after all the highly complex mechanisms of human flesh, that wasn't surprising. Dimly from beyond the walls noise of other repair work reached them: clashing as hull-plates were fitted to ships undergoing overhaul, the subtly disturbing moan of drive units on test.

Maddalena had been staring at tonight's half moon—small, and reduced in size still further by its distance from Cyclops—for some minutes before she spoke again.

"There are an awful lot of things I can't get clear about the situation here, Gus. Maybe you'd better educate me."

"Hm?" Langenschmidt jerked his head. "Oh! Oh yes. I'm sorry—I'm still working on the false assumption that you were briefed before you were sent to Cyclops. Since you weren't presumably you know practically nothing about it. After all, it's never been a world to hit the galactic headlines."

"The last time I paid it any attention was twenty years back. There must have been many changes since then."

"Yes and no." Langenschmidt had been perching on the end of the room's single large table; now he grew uncomfortable and moved to a contoured chair, dropping his body into it absently and letting it slump. "The—the mood of Cyclops, the planetary average of human attitudes, so to speak, is constant over a long period, as it is anywhere. What was the word I heard you apply?"

"Predatory?"

"Exactly. Ummmm . . . Where the hell ought I to start?" Langenschmidt rubbed his face tiredly. "Clear back at the beginning, I guess. It must start with the fact that it's an unsupervised foundation."

Maddalena started. "*Is* it now? That accounts for a great deal, I imagine."

"I'm sure it does. Of the two hundred sixty civilized worlds, over two hundred followed the standard official pattern—exploration, selected colonization under the direction of a polymath

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trained intensively for the development of one and only one particular planet, and eventually opening to immigration. Cyclops is among the anomalous fifty-odd. It's a second-stage offshoot from Dagon. Ring any bells?"

"Of course it does." Maddalena hesitated, then gave a little nervous laugh. "Dear Gus! How little you've changed! You still have exactly the same lecturing manner as you did when you first briefed me on ZRP Fourteen—touchy, expecting this conceited Earthgirl to have ignorance of unplumbable depth."

"I'm sorry." Langenschmidt gave a crooked smile. "So we take the rest as read. They made one of their rare mistakes on Dagon, and picked for its polymath a man who couldn't stand the strain. He clashed with one of his continental managers, who finally couldn't endure it any more and decided he could do better by himself on some other planet. He, and about four thousand followers, left Dagon and set out to—well, to homestead Cyclops, I guess.

"It was as tough in the early days as it must have been on ZRP One, or some other comparatively hospitable ZRP. Naturally, since he'd attracted his followers on the basis of liberty from the authoritarian whims of a bad polymath, the original leader insisted on at least the structure of a representative government, and that's survived, but only as a formality to the degree required to qualify Cyclops as a member of galactic civilization. Their laws follow the Unified Galactic Code, too. In theory.

"In *fact*, starting off with so great a handicap, they let all this remain a formality and proceeded to develop a hand-to-mouth pattern they've never escaped from. It's one of the few civilized planets where ruthlessness brings power. Quist, who has been the *de facto* head of government for a long time now, has no better qualifications for the job than sheer love of authority. She loves giving orders and having them obeyed that significant one per cent more than anyone else.

"If you want handy comparisons—well, they have to be pre-Galactic. First century atomic era. Earthside areas like Spain, some countries of Latin America, and some of South Asia. Where you had an economy too impoverished to support the governmental structure of a financially efficient administration, but a sort of crust of great wealth overlying it. Half the population are at the poverty line, a third are illiterate, a quarter are diseased—but perhaps one in twenty have achieved some kind of personal success by pure persistnece."

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"I didn't realize you knew Earthside history as well as that," Maddalena said after a moment's silence.

"I don't, really. I just needed some guide to Cyclops when they posted me here, and these are the examples our social psychologists dredged up for me."

"What does support the Cyclopean economy? And what's the total population now?"

"Efficient census-taking is one of the expensive luxuries they don't enjoy, but our best estimates are around seven to eight hundred million. Mark you, life expectancy is low; one child in eight dies in its first year. As to the economy: it's self-supporting in respect of food and housing—the climate in the equatorial belt is an advantage there, with very mild rainy seasons and no real winters—and several other basics like textiles. . . It's a safe Class A planet, or the original settlers would never have survived.

"About the only exports are fish-oil, which serves as a source of proteins for further synthesis and ultimate use as a diet-supplement on some nearby vitamin-poor worlds, and raw materials from the asteroid belt. There are some lumps of ore pure enough to be worth shipping long distances. But the margin is slender, and two invisible exports make the crucial difference between getting by and relapsing to starvation.

"One of them is a small tramp space-fleet, consisting of a hundred-odd interstellar vessels. And the other is—all this." Langenschmidt gestured to embrace their surroundings. "Cyclops is conveniently sited with respect to the forward bases in this sector, and we've rented this island since shortly after the Corps was constituted.

"Trapped in their economic snare, the Cyclopeans don't like having us here. Isn't it a truly ancient platitude that the poor don't like the police. But here we are, and they can't afford to be rid of us."

The office communicator sounded, and Nole's voice, nervous, addressed them. "Commandant, can you come down to the computing room? I'm getting results I can't make sense of, and I think you'll want to see them."

"Coming!" Langenschmidt said briskly, and rose.

VERY cautiously, Bracy Dyge swung his legs over the side of the bed. It was further to the floor than he had expected. Anyway, this hardly fitted his concept of a bed—it was an elaborate therapeutic installation with a disturbing aura of near-sentience about it, and he would much rather have been on the pile of inflated fish-skins which he was

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used to at home, three inches from the ground.

He had been instructed to lie here and sleep, but he'd been unable to. After a short lifetime on the edge of starvation, the nutrient and restorative shots he had been given had acted like a violent stimulant—something the doctors should have made allowances for, but hadn't, being used to scaling their treatment to the healthier and better-fed patients they normally had.

He felt, in short, fighting fit. The burns he had suffered when he let off his signal rockets against the wolfshark had been dressed with something to relieve the pain, and although he had lost half his braided hair and several square inches of skin, the injured area was cool and perfectly comfortable. Nothing distracted him from what was uppermost in his mind—to wit, the fact that he had been brought to half-legendary Corps Island, from which the local inhabitants were strictly excluded.

Tomorrow he would have to ask to be sent away—he owed it to his family to get back to sea and try and complete his unfinished business. He had ventured to tell the doctor of his dream-ambition—being allowed to join the Corps—but something in the answering laugh had convinced him it was a ridiculous proposal. They had promised to mend his fish-finder, and he would have to be content with that as his reward for rescuing the wolfshark-hunter.

If only it had been one of the men from the Corps base—! But it was useless to wish that the past were different.

Maybe he could beg replacements for his torn solar sails, too. Even so, tomorrow he would have to leave—and lying wakeful without using this opportunity to see how the Corps lived was more than he could endure.

He stole to the door and fumbled with the latch. It proved to be simple in operation, and after pressure on a raised patch in its centre the panel slid back into the wall, revealing an empty corridor beyond.

After cautious listening for footsteps or hushing wheels such as he had heard earlier, when he was being brought in, he darted down the passage and around the first corner.

Here the nature of his surroundings changed completely. Instead of barely delineated doors, there were large oblong windows, and not giving on to the outside, either, like any windows he had seen before. They revealed the interior of the adjacent rooms.

He crept to the first one and peered through. All he could see was a tangle of equipment like the interior of his fish-finder, but

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much more complicated. He tried to discern its function, and failed; then it moved of its own accord, some shining arm making a connection, and alarmed at this he moved on.

Here what he found was far more interesting. There was a naked woman.

She was tall, and very beautiful even though her skin was darker than Bracy's own—a sign, according to his standards, that she was of his own low class, too poor to sit in the shade when the sun was hot. She lay supine on a padded trolley, eyes closed. Around her, the whole room was filled with mechanisms that moved slowly, slowly, on incomprehensible tasks.

His eyes traced the curves of her shapely body: left arm here, folded over her breast, right arm —where?

With sudden shock he realized that her right arm was in the maw of one of the machines, which was moving up it in precisely the same way as a sucker-mouth lamprey engulfed its unfortunate prey.

Like all poverty-line children on Cyclops, he had been threatened with the vengeance of the Corps when he misbehaved as a youngster. To see what he mistook for some terrible torture unnerved him, and he uttered a cry of terror.

"What was that?" a voice said, distant but distinct, and he realized abruptly that had he not been so fascinated by what he had discovered he would have heard footsteps approaching. Gasping, he spun, and caught sight of a man and a woman at the intersection of corridors behind him.

"Who in the—?" the man said. "Hey, you!"

Bracy took to his heels, fleeing randomly down the blank-walled passages. Behind him came the fearful pursuers, shouting, until the superior speed which terror lent enabled him to outstrip them, and he came to a dark tunnel-like tube down which he dived, thinking to find sanctuary.

"That must be the fisherboy who rescued Kolb," Langenschmidt told Maddalena. "No one else with hair like that would be in the hospital. And where the hell he's managed to disappear to, *I* don't know. But one thing's sure—he was heading for master operations control, and we've got to winkle him out before he breaks something. See a communicator anywhere? Whatever Nole has found it will just have to wait."

X

THE overnight rain had made the track into a muddy swamp. The patient, immensely

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strong yorb floundered many times, its broad pads sliding on the greasy ground as it strove to get the laden cart past a particularly treacherous patch. On each occasion, however, Firdausi got down without complaint to break branches from the surrounding undergrowth and put them down in front of the wheels.

The reins limp and slippery in her hands, Soraya found herself stirred to dim gratitude for the boy's silence. Almost, she was minded to go back on her decision that if the Receivers of the Sick accepted her mother she would leave her home for ever. Perhaps Firdausi did indeed have her best interests at heart. . .

The old woman lay uncomplaining on the heap of soft skins with which they had padded the crude wooden cart. Occasionally her hands twitched in her sleep. It was better that she should sleep, Soraya thought. Even though she had had a long lucid period since the near-fatal attack of the quakes, the disease had weakened her dreadfully; she could hardly walk more than a dozen steps without a fit of fainting, and her skin was shrunken over her wasted flesh.

She had said she was pleased at Soraya's decision to try and get her taken by the Receivers, declaring she had been a useless burden for far too long. But was that a rational opinion, or the apathetic consequence of the debilitating sickness? After so many bouts of it, anyone might wish to get things over and done with.

"Not far now," Firdausi whispered. "One more hill, and we shall be on a good dry road for the rest of the trip."

She gave a nod, but in reality scarcely heard what he had said.

The sky was grey above; the trees around, draped with their curious hair-like foliage, were grey-green and still dripping from the last downpour before dawn. It was a setting which exactly matched her depressed mood.

Suppose they don't take her after all? Suppose they say I've delayed too long—that if I'd brought her to them a month sooner, they could have helped her, but now it's useless? I shall never forgive myself. Never!..

The yorb drew the cart over the crest of the last hill before their destination, and as Firdausi had promised they found themselves on a good hard road, well beaten down and with a top dressing of compacted gravel. Ahead, the town loomed, much larger than the village where she had spent her life: there must be almost a thousand houses, she told herself.

It was hard to credit the stories of the ancients—that men had once been numbered in millions,

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and dwelt among the shining stars . . .

A little distance further on, they encountered a farm laborer backing a balky yorb into the shafts of a cart piled high with edible roots, and he greeted them civilly. When they explained the purpose of their errand, he pointed towards the town.

"The Receivers aren't yet here, but they're expected hourly, I believe. Good health attends my family, luckily, so I made no special inquiry this time. Go to the market square—you'll find others gathered who are afflicted as you are."

"Many thanks," Firdausi said, and urged their yorb onward.

LORS Heimdall's lip curled with utter contempt as the first sign reached him that they were nearing the goal: the smell.

The stupidity of these people! The dirt, the disease, the lack of hygiene! How could they be regarded as human at all when they lived like wild beasts? If this were truly man's "natural state", from which only a slow process of technical evolution had lifted him towards the clean bright cities of galactic civilization, it was a wonder any progress was ever achieved.

They seemed to lack all rational system, operating by a bunch of crude uncomprehended near-superstitions. Boiling their drinking-water, for example—from here, it was possible to see the plume of steam ascending over the local waterworks. That was presumably a *diktat* imposed by one of the original refugees who had kept his head in the aftermath of disaster, and would have made sense in the context of a proper sanitary code. As it stood, it was a pointless ritual negated by the lack of decent drainage.

Still, some of the accidents of cultural evolution had turned out to be advantageous. The institution of the Receivers of the Sick, for instance. That must have begun as a form of quarantine and isolation for sufferers from diseases which the rudimentary facilities of the refugees could not cope with, it would have been hoped that some at least of the patients would recover naturally, but as a precaution they were removed from their own communities to special locations.

The system had fallen almost completely into disuse, because the staff of these quarantine areas were themselves successively wiped out by infection caught from those they were trying to help. But reviving it had provided Heimdall and his men with an excellent cover for their work.

And if it ever came to light what had been done here, there was little chance of swift retribu-

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tion. Many civilized planets recognized the right of euthanasia for the incurably sick, and provided the debate about non-interference, yes or no, could be kept on the boil the Corps would never dare execute summary punishment.

He found these reflections comforting to some degree—and he needed comfort. For all his mask of dedicated ruthlessness, Heimdall was capable of anxiety, and what Rimerley had told him had been alarming, to say the least.

It was to be hoped that his ingenious trick to provide the Corps with another major headache and distract their interest would work.

His train of attendants—riding yorbs, as he was: no other transportation was known here apart from rough carts—followed him down the hill road towards the town. Behind came the wagon, covered with an opaque cloth screen on wooden poles, in which were the well-guarded secrets of their job. A party of local notables waited to greet them at the town's edge, and after a suitably grave exchange of good wishes they all proceeded together to the market square.

We shall have to do some more propaganda here, Heimdall advised himself as he scanned the horrible collection of palsied and maimed and sickly candidates for the good offices of the Receivers. *We must get it through their heads that an aged crone, or an ill-nourished infant, is beyond hope—what we can "offer to help" is typically a healthy but injured late adolescent.*

Suddenly, as he was about to turn away, he saw the girl sitting with her boy-friend on the last-arrived cart at the side of the square. His heart gave an uncharacteristic leap. To a first glance, it appeared that what he had been asked by Rimerley to locate had turned up without his even looking. Of course, it would require closer examination to make sure, but the chance was so good he found himself grinning in a fashion quite unsuited to his pose in this society.

NERVOUSLY, Soraya waited as the Receivers made their rounds of the sick. Firdausi wanted to hold her hand while they watched, but she could not bear anyone's touch except her mother's. The old woman was awake and kept trying to lift her head, but failed.

At last the Receivers came to their cart, and after acknowledging good wishes peered down solemnly at the wasted body on the heap of skins.

"Your mother?" the leader of the Receivers inquired of them.

"Mine," Soraya said. "Un—this young man is just a friend."

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"I see." The Receiver nodded. He had a face of such sternness —nose cruelly beaked, mouth thin and straight—that Soraya found it hard to recall what Marouz had told her: that these were good men, full of ancient wisdom and kind intentions.

"Come with me, please," he said abruptly, and gestured Soraya to descend from the cart. Shivering a little, she complied, and was astonished when the Receiver set off at a brisk pace towards his own wagon.

Following, she tried to point out that it was her mother and not herself who had come to seek help. The man ignored her protestations, saying nothing until they came to the wagon. Then he made her get up on it, holding the cloth screens to let her in.

Beyond, in a tiny enclosure, there was a table with many strange things on it: little glass tubes, white tiles marked in squares on some of which were smears of blood, dishes and jars containing colored liquids. There were also two chairs, one this side, one that side of the table.

A man in Receiver robes with his hood thrown back appeared from between the hangings that concealed the rear of the wagon. He instructed her to sit down, taking from a pad on the table a sharp needle which he jabbed without warning into the ball of her thumb.

She gave a little cry, and the Receiver who had escorted her uttered a few words of mechanical reassurance.

There followed a sort of ritual whose meaning she did not understand. The blood from the needle-prick was taken in a glass tube and smeared on the white tiles; then some more was dropped into a jar of colored liquid; then more still, which had to be squeezed out, was taken out of sight into the rear of the wagon. Incomprehensible sounds followed—humming like insects, gentle clattering, muttered comments in near-whispers.

The man with his hood thrown back returned and gave a nod to the other man waiting at Soraya's side. He had brought with him another needle, which he drove into the fleshy part of her forearm—once more without warning her.

Eyes pleading, Soraya mutely sought an explanation for all this.

"There is nothing we can do for your mother," said the man who had brought her. "We have said often and often that the aged are beyond our help. Sickness must mostly be overcome by the sufferer; we can best help those who have youth and strength on their side."

Soraya's ears were full of the rushing of blood.

"However, by the same token,

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that makes you very lucky," the Receiver said.

"What?" Through the beginnings of tears she gazed up.

"You are young enough to be helped, and it is still early in the course of—"

"*What?*" She leapt to her feet. "*I'm* not sick! I— I—"

The rushing in her ears gave way to a ringing; the cloth walls, the tall black-garbed Receivers, everything seemed to swirl around like water in a stirred pot.

She collapsed.

WITH great apprehension Firdausi saw the Receiver come back alone from their wagon. He glanced at Soraya's mother and saw she had returned to coma. But where was Soraya?

"I have good and bad news for you, young man," the Receiver said, coming close.

"I—don't understand!" Firdausi stammered.

"Your girl-friend has come to us in good time, and we will accept her."

"But—!" His mind froze; his eyes sought a key to this mystery on the Receiver's face.

"I presume you will be entitled to accept the payment we customarily make?" the black-robed man encouraged, and lifted into sight a heavy jingling bag which could only contain the crude soft metal which served as currency here.

Greed fought with amazement in Firdausi's baffled brain. That bag looked heavy—the size of a rich girl's dowry. Nonetheless, he choked out, "But what about her mother?"

"She is much too old, and past our help."

There was a moment of silence. Then he said with a surge of determination, "But Soraya is fit and well!"

"You think so? Then come with me!"

Dumb, he complied, and trailed the Receiver across the square to the space before the covered wagon. There, his astonished eyes met the spectacle of Soraya, being carried down the steps from the wagon to be laid on a pallet on the ground. There was absolutely no mistaking the tremors that racked her slender young body.

The quakes. The dread killer was afflicting her as it had done her mother.

"In our care, there is hope for her," the Receiver was saying. "If you are fond of her, you'll raise no objection."

Firdausi wasn't listening. He barely felt the tug on his hand as the string of the metal-heavy bag was looped around his nerveless fingers.

Nonetheless, since it was the only consolation he was likely to be offered, he finally clutched it to him.

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XI

ALARM lights were already flashing and bells sounding discreet but insistent warnings everywhere in the hospital when Nole came running full pelt to join Langenschmidt and Maddalena outside the entry to master operations control.

"I've alerted as many of the staff as I can reach," he panted. "Not many, of course—we don't maintain a night schedule normally. And this isn't the kind of emergency we have drills prepared for. What exactly happened?"

Langenschmidt explained how they came to spot Bracy on their way to join him in the computing office. Nole gave a comprehending nod.

"He must have been looking in at one of the regeneration rooms —probably the end one. There's a woman in there who lost her right hand in an accident at the main repair dock last week. What this fisherboy was doing out of his own room, though—that's what I can't understand. He seemed very tired and perfectly co-operative when I checked him earlier."

"I'll make a guess," Maddalena said sourly. "He didn't want to miss his one and only chance of looking over the premises."

"That doesn't matter," Langenschmidt cut in. "The fact is he's gone down that tunnel there, and it's taking him where he can cause one hell of a mess if he's not stopped quickly."

"Where does it lead?" Maddalena demanded.

"I told you, didn't I? The hospital's power-plant is down there, all its automatic service controls, all its supplies of things like activated water, oxygen, life-sustaining nutrient flows, artificial tissue-synthesis—the whole lot."

"Why in the galaxy, then, do you just leave the tunnel open like that?" Maddalena exclaimed, astonished.

"Anyone likely to come this way in the normal course of events is a Corpsman, and too sensible to pry into dark corners," Langenschmidt grunted. "I'm going to have your hide, Nole—you realize that, don't you? Leaving the kid in an unlocked room!"

"Yes, but—" Nole recognized the futility of making excuses, and turned away.

Men and women were joining them now from every direction, one or two in the same self-sterilizing whites as Nole, the majority in casual clothing, having been routed out of their quarters or called back from recreation.

Langenschmidt briefed them crisply on the situation. Dismayed, they exchanged glances.

"Is there any risk of him doing deliberate damage?" one of the

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earliest arrivals inquired of him.

"No, but he's probably in panic. He ran as soon as he saw us. Any suggestions?"

For a moment there was silence. Then an elderly woman who had apparently left the solar therapy room to come here, for she wore only a muslin thigh-length shift, spoke up.

"Not more than two people to go after him, wearing respirators, and carrying cylinders of some anaesthetic with a high tolerance of dilution. Knocking him out would be easier than trying to reason with him."

"Great," Langenschmidt said. "Let's—"

"Just a moment," Nole put in. "How about the radiation?"

"What are you talking about?" Langenschmidt blinked. "We're on fusion, aren't we? What radiation?"

"I have a couple of cases in at the moment in need of isotope treatment. I'm processing iodine-131 and potassium-40. I'm not saying he will, but he might go too close to the bombardment source."

"Marvellous," Langenschmidt said bitterly. "So we don't just go after him looking like monsters—we go looking like mechanical men, in armored suits. Well, if it's got to be done, it's got to be done. Volunteers?"

"I'll go," Nole muttered. "My fault."

BRACY DYGE was hardly thinking at all now. The effect of irrational terror had been multiplied a score of times in his mind by the combined impact of the drugs he had been given and the violent expenditure of energy while he was fleeing from unnamable horrors. To find himself among machinery—seemingly without end, floor to ceiling—which at any moment might devour him as the naked woman behind the window had appeared to be being consumed, was more than the fragile web of his self-control could stand. He was moaning and panting as he stumbled around the banked machines seeking a place of safety.

When he first came down here, it had been dark, but some distant switch had been turned and now the whole huge room glowed with sourceless, shadowless light. Was there no dark corner for him to skulk in?

Movements at the corner of vision terrified him; lights signalling on instrument panels made him jump. Even the high-ozone smell, indicative of the immense power slumbering within the apparatus, was fearful to him who had never before been so near a fusion plant.

Gasping for breath, he halted on a gleaming panel set into the floor, which was warm to his bare feet, and heard a noise behind him. Jerking his head around,

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he saw two white, bulky forms like distorted human beings approaching noiselessly, carrying what his fright-warped eyes interpreted as guns. He screamed wordlessly and ran forward again, randomly, to begin a deadly game of cat-and-mouse all over the big hall.

It was not long before his remnants of cunning discovered that there was one place where his pursuers were reluctant to go, twice, he saw them sidle away from a large black machine the body of which was a metal tube as long as his arm, with thick power cables snaking away from it across the floor. Why they avoided it, he couldn't guess, but as soon as he found a means of doing so, he dived for this tabooed zone.

And that was where they gassed him down, but not before he had acquired a dose of hard radiation sufficient to strip the other half of his head bare of his prized black hair.

"WE got him," Nole said unnecessarily as the limp body was placed on a trolley for removal to the wards. "But he'll be one sick boy for at least a week."

"You're an idiot, Nole," Langenschmidt said in a toneless voice. "That's only the start of the trouble. How about the family he's said to have left in Gratignol? Now we'll have to send them some sort of relief, and if we don't gauge it exactly right we'll have half the poor fisherfolk of the planet begging for handouts to match those given to this one family . . . Hell, that's my worry, and it can wait for tomorrow. I'm getting tired, you know? I've had a pretty wearing time lately, and dealing with emergencies when I ought to be catching up on lost sleep isn't helping me any!"

Nole hesitated. "Uh—don't you want to know about the data I got on Kolb's leg?"

It seemed like last year, instead of an hour earlier, when they had set out to the computing room to inspect these curious findings. Langenschmidt ran a weary hand through his hair.

"Okay, I guess so. But there's not much point, really. I can hardly take any action before the morning, and even then—oh, I'm *rambling!* Hurry up, then, before I keel over"

Following him down the corridor with Nole, Maddalena found herself regretting that she had ever uttered her contrary opinion when Langenschmidt told her about the ZRP controversy. The pleasure he had felt on seeing her had masked the toll the problem had taken from him. Now, she was coming to realize that if it affected him so deeply she had no right to judge it on the basis of her own miserable experience on

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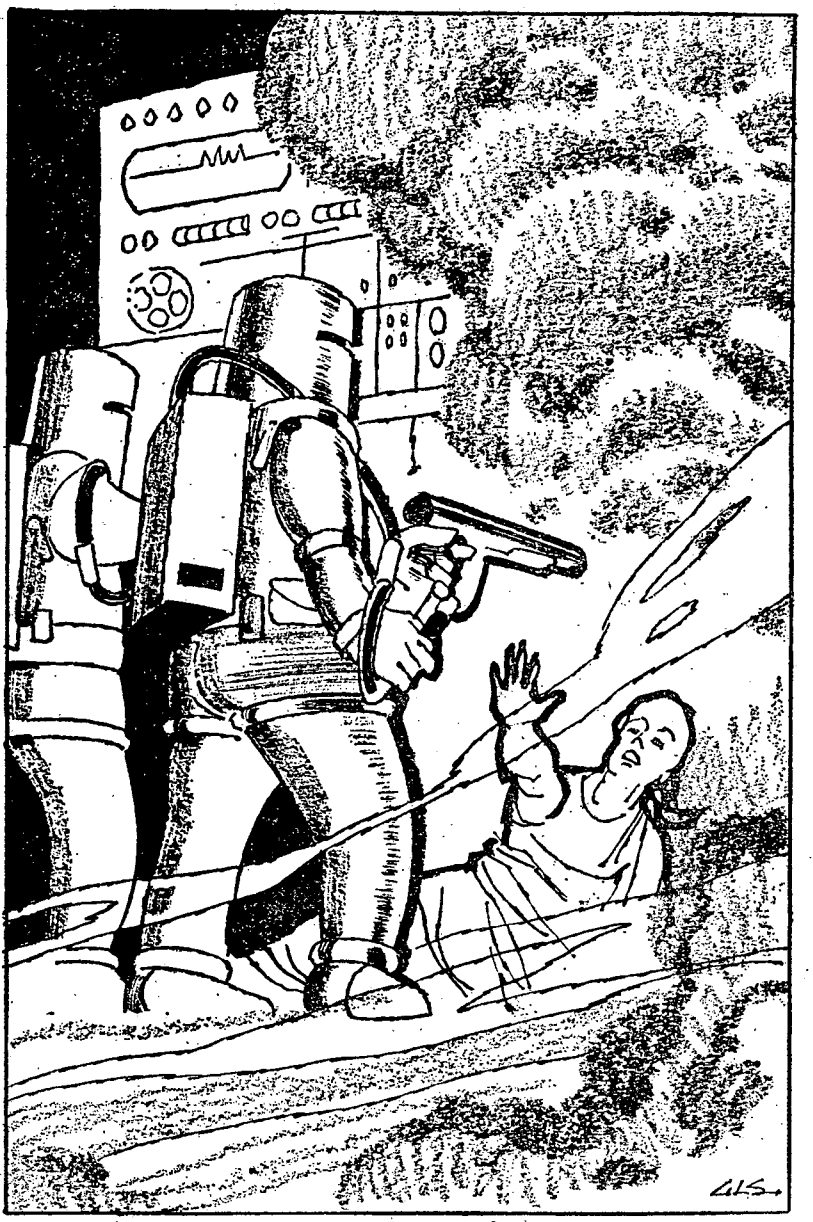

a single ZRP—which, after all, she had chosen herself, with her eyes open.

"Here's the print-out," Nole said, with a kind of eager nervousness perhaps intended to disguise his embarrassment at letting the Dyge boy get out of his room and cause so much bother. "You'll see it comes in three sections. First off, I asked for a local identification—in other words, for a likely point of origin on Cyclops."

"And got a zero reading, hm?" Langenschmidt's brow was furrowing; he seemed to have recovered a little from his fit of exhaustion.

"That's right. The gene-type is non-Cyclopean, you may take that as definite. His other leg, from which I took a comparison sample, is local and quite common.

"Now the memory does contained a list of those worlds—some eight or ten of them, I believe—where donor-grafting is an accepted medical practice. Some cultures regard it as an honorable thing to permit part of one's body to continue in service after one's death. But there's nowhere within about thirty parsecs where this applies.

"Anyway, I got another zero out of that line of inquiry. So I set for all-galaxy parameters, and I got nonsense!"

He made an impatient gesture at the print-out, and Langenschmidt read it through very slowly and carefully.

"How many's that? Ninety-some worlds?" he grunted.

"Ninety-two—but blazes, look at them, will you? Highest probability, which isn't a match even so, is Earth! And who would conceivably have got Kolb a limb-graft from Earth?"

"What do you think, Maddalena?" Lagenschmidt demanded.

"Unless things have changed beyond belief," Maddalena said slowly, "no Earthborn person would consider letting part of his body be exported after death."

"But that's not the whole story!" Nole rapped. "The computer was hesitating about assigning these locations. The correspondence is marginal. And the direction in which the variations are significant is ridiculous! I could print the information if you want, but it's highly technical."

"We'll take your word," Langenschmidt said. "Just make it a bit clearer, will you?"

"Well—uh—one could say that the direction of the anomalies is away from the human."

THERE was a puzzled silence. Maddalena broke it. "It couldn't be a synthesized prosthetic, could it? I've never heard of such a thing, but it seems a reasonable suggestion."

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Impressed, Nole gave a nod. "You mean a limb synthesized to an approximate specification, instead of regenerated to make a match with the opposite limb? It could be, it just could."

"But is there anywhere to your knowledge where such a technique is employed?"

"No . . . Though with the log-jam we have in scientific communication these days, that's not conclusive. If you like, I'll have the data sifted and give you a verdict in the morning."

"You do that," Langenschmidt sighed. "Right now, I want to call it a day."

"Gus, before we go, I want to check on a silly idea I had a moment ago."

Maddalena looked at Nole. "Can you fix an Earthside location with your equipment? In other words, can you determine the areas where the correspondence is closest?"

"Earth's population is pretty damned mixed," Nole said, staring. "After all, every single gene-type in the galaxy is found there, barring a few late mutations."

"I'm pretty mixed myself," Maddalena agreed impatiently. "Iberian, Amerind, and who knows what? Check anyway."

Nole shrugged and put the question to the machine.

"Below the limit of acceptable probability," he announced. "The closest approach is—uh—how do you pronounce that? Iran?"

"Gus," Maddalena said, barely audible, "there was a second language on Zarathustra, wasn't there?"

"Of course there was! You've been speaking a bastard cross between Irani and Galactic for the past twenty—"

Langenschmidt broke off, his face going milk-pale.

"Dr. Nole," Maddalena pursued, "did you compute your findings with non-civilized genetypes as well as civilized? I'll wager you didn't!" A trifle maliciously, she added, "I'm referring, of course, to the ZRP's."

Nole gave a strangled gasp and revised his instructions to the machine. Almost instantly there was a fresh print-out.

"Probability seventy per cent plus or minus two," he reported. "No, I'm afraid you're wrong, in that case—which is a relief. The reading would have to exceed eighty to be actionable."

"Even if we turn out to be dealing with ZRP Number Twenty-two?" Maddalena said.

There was a frozen pause. Then Langenschmidt clapped his hands and exploded. "Maddalena, how have I managed without you for all this time? Nole, where the hell is the nearest communicator? Maddalena, you're a genius—*damn* you!"

(*Concluded next month*)

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MAKE MINE TREES

By DAVID R. BUNCH

The line between the vegetable and animal worlds is not always clearly demarcated. With revenge as a spur, can one find ways to cross it?

THEY probably think I like it, see me out walking him. Have him dressed all in green, and they smile when we cross at the street corners, with the red light holding them off us, and they snug back in their Caddies glad to see a salt-of-the-earth guy out with his son. But I'm not. Hate every moment of it. Want to get back to the formula. Just want to work on the formula.

The formula—well, now there's something! I've got it done; I know it'll work. But I'm after a faster reaction—something all at once so all I'll have to do is have my spade and maneuver the one to the spot and loan him a cigarette or a stick of chewing gum maybe, or maybe we're on a picnic and having soda-pop drinks. Anything to get him—or her—a whiff or a snifter, see, 'cause that'll do the job. And then I'll just loam him—or her—in. AND SAVE THE WORLD!

Sure, they think my wife went south with that Spanish mambo dancer, who was from down that way. But what they don't know includes the fact that he didn't get there either. Ha! See him 'most every day, and her too, when I walk my son.

My son! Sure, I love my (?) son, little guy in green, out past the thorn bush and the tall dark-olive thing in thin shimmering leaves, walking him through the big park. (I'm the one's walking; he's in a stroller because he's somewhere under three, and too, his legs are a little like walking canes now. From the formula). But I have such love for him that I wish he were not here at all, and when I see them smug, so

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snug in their Caddies, I'm sure. To grow up to be that way would be AWFUL. So it's out of love that I do it for my (?) son. And it's out of love that I'll do it for all of them. When I get square with the formula. It's love, I swear, makes me strive so with the formula.

And my wife and the Spanish dancer? Well, yes, that was love, yes, to save them each from the other. You see, my love is broad and so wide-minded. And I couldn't be a murderer.

But to get back to the child. Sometimes he asks for his mama. You know, as a young child will he yells, "MAMA!" And then he says, "Oh, wherein'lld she go?" Because he remembers his mama. And I say, "Little Son, your mommy is alive and doing quite well. Responding to the formula. She is near the one she loves, she is far enough from me, and you don't need her. NEVER! You've got me! Why yell?" And he looks at me that strange squint out of his eyes that were once bright-sky blue, like the heavens of June he was born in, but now they're going greeny like two cold mossed-up springs, and I'm wondering if he can still see at all. "Mama," he cries and we roll on through, past the thorn bush and the tall tree with the dark-green shimmying leaves.

Then a storm comes up and we roll home maybe, or maybe we just go have ice cream until the weather blows itself fair again. When we get home I give Little Son a snack, maybe a ham-and-mustard with the weak beer I've fixed for him, and a knockout pill, and then it's me for the formula. I'm trying it on mice, cockroaches, lizards—anything that happens to be crawling loose around the house. Of course I'm feeding Sonny the old reliable all the time, but it works so slow. Only his legs have shown anything yet. And possibly his eyes; I don't know. And with my wife and the Spanish dancer—well, it took two years—two whole wide solid years of tact, smiles, playing it dumb, feeding the formula any way I could, and suffering, suffering . . . before they were ready for . . . DIRT!

Ready! Ha ha. Some day I expect to be out in the woods alone, as the saying is, ha ha. Because the other day I fed it to a mouse, and—well, immediately he just wasn't a mouse anymore; he was —say, when he blooms, I'll let you know.

BUT time goes by! Five months have slipped past on Little Son and the formula, and I have tried to do it kindly, much more kindly than with the wife and the Spanish dancer. And also faster. Time of experimentation for the salvation of mankind and the retrieve-

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ment of all human errors. Time of apparent failure. And last night another try.

We are pushing for the park again. I need rest and sunshine and time to think about mistakes. Wherein lies failure? We cross the street where the lights are, where the metal tears stream past, and some of the faces wait. We move amidst smiles that mean zero. I go on to the edge of the park, concerned only with Little Son so loungy in his green stroller. I think about last night and some small changes I have made. Enough? Perhaps they'll be enough.

We pause in clouded sunshine, before us the cool inviting greenery of the park trees, behind us the rock-bleak streets where the racing gas-joys scream, tailing their neighbors' fenders. I gaze into the face of a child, and it seems that in my heart there is room only for a little sorrow, some remorse, and great GREAT! hope—hope for what I hope I have done. Last night.

Little Son stares past me and through me, his flat green mossing eyes fixed on the trees of the park, staring at them immovably. Then, my great hopes jumping, my apprehensions leaping wild, I slip Little Son the formula. With the latest changes. Smeared on the remains of an old green lollipop.

After one small lick and a terrible-face grimace the remains of the old green lollipop are flung away. But a shaking seizes the child. In a way it seems a slight and most usual vibration of head, arms and whole upper body, as one seized with a sudden chill might go. Or it might even be a child's explainable reaction to some bitter, terrible taste. In another way this shaking seems a most unusual shaking because, though Little Son trembles small, he trembles remarkably fast, so fast in fact that I hear a buzz and drone. And under his white-brown skin slowly turning to dullish green there surely lurks some violent signs of changes and great transformation. Then—oh hoped-for sight, oh salvation for all—I see! Just a green blister . . . a long blister . . . at the lower edge of . . . a bursting! . . . an unfolding! . . . then more! more!!

I run with Little Son. I make the wheels of his stroller spin until the wire spokes seem all one solid disk. We speed Speed SPEED toward a place where a thorn bush is and some tall leaves that are dancing. I draw the collapsible spade from the stroller bag, because I know I must work fast now. And all the while Little Son is shrieking, "Mama!" in a strangling voice that sounds like it has a dozen match sticks in it. And the blisters are coming on

(*Please turn to page 114*)

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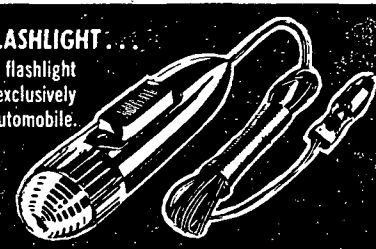

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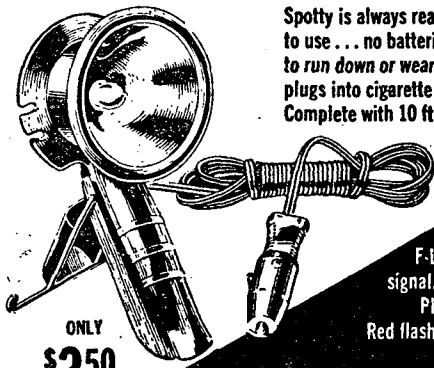

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him like tight long-bean balloons, and they are bursting nicely. —I dig a hole carefully by the thorn bush, on the far side from the tree of leaves that are always dancing.

Looking hardly at all like the remains of a little child, waving and screaming and bursting grandly, he stands there waist-deep in the soil where I have placed him. His clotting eyes that had looked so much like the flatness of mossing pools here of late now bulge at me, ready to break, I know, with happy green. The thorn bush leans at him in a high wind that springs up, in a moment of reunion. "Little Son," I yell into the moan of the gale, "good-bye, I must fly. I AM CALLED TO SAVE THE WORLD!"

Then, pushing the stroller into a deep black lake and not looking back, not even thinking back, I race home to the formula.

THE END

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION (*Act of October 23, 1962; Section 4369, Title 39, United States Code*).

1. Date of Filing: October 1, 1964.
2. Title of Publication: Fantastic, Stories of Imagination.
3. Frequency of Issue: Monthly.
4. Location of Known Office of Publication: 434 South Wabash Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60605, Cook County.
5. Location of the Headquarters or General Business Offices of the Publishers: One Park Avenue, New York, New York 10016.
6. Names and Addresses of Publisher, Editor, and Managing Editor:
   Publisher: Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, One Park Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10016.
   Editor: Cele G. Lalli, One Park Avenue, New York, New York 10016.
   Managing Editor: None.
7. Owner: Ziff-Davis Publishing Co., One Park Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10016; Amelia Ziff, One Park Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10016; David Ziff, One Park Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10016; William Ziff, One Park Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10016; Priscilla Stafford, One Park Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10016.
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	Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months	Single Issue Nearest To Filing Date (Sept.)
A. Total No. Copies Printed (*Net Press Run*)	68,404	59,548
B. Paid Circulation		
1. To Term Subscribers By Mail, Carrier Delivery Or By Other Means.	1,077	1,107
2. Sales Through Agents, News Dealers, Or Otherwise.	26,038	23,500
C. Free Distribution (*including samples*) By Mail, Carrier Delivery, Or By Other Means.	630	643
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☐ MULTIPLE ☐ CHOICE

By JOHN DOUGLAS

OF the half a hundred boys in the large, dull-painted room, no two knew one another, and yet they were all the same age and were dressed in the uniform of the 10th Educational Section, Rating E ("Elite"). They had been sent from the Western Area for the most important test in their lives, the final examination of the 10th Section, E group. Ten of their fifteen years had been spent preparing the boys for this examination, which would determine their fitness for Government service. Having been selected "E" at the age of five by intelligence and aptitude tests they had been taken from their families and put into state universities (which controlled education through the 19 possible sections—from kindergarten to the most advanced degree), where they had been needed by the complex system. The training and competition had been rigorous, for the future leaders of the Government would be chosen from the ranks of those who graduated from the 10th Section, E.

Each boy who entered the unfurnished, barrack-like place had been given a number, and now a teacher with a portable loudspeaker was calling out the numbers, assigning them to rooms which could be reached by an adjoining corridor. When a boy's number was called, he left the main room and walked down the corridor until he found the numbered door to which he had been assigned. Each door opened into a small waiting-room, containing chairs and a table on which had

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been placed a number of new magazines. In each room there were two chairs, but by the time the sorting process was over, three boys had been assigned to each room, an apparent oversight on the part of the supervising officials.

"So," said a dark, heavy-set boy, as he entered one of these rooms: "You saved me a seat!"

One of the boys in the room giggled nervously, the other smiled and got up. "Take mine if you wish," he said.

Now the other, as if at a hint, rose also: "Oh, I'm sorry . . . take *mine!*"

The dark boy made a wry, clicking sound with his lips and held out his hand. "My name is Carl," he said to the boy who had first risen.

"I'm Joseph, and this is Dermet"—pointing to the other. Joseph was brown-headed, and his face was this side of ugly. Dermet was handsome enough, but his blondness was rather pale, perhaps from the effects of tension.

"To tell the truth," said Carl, "I don't feel much like sitting."

"Neither do I." said Dermet. "I'm nerovus as a cat."

"I was just telling him," said Joseph, leaning against the wall, "That a little nervousness will put a fine edge on his brain—like a whetstone."

"Is that right?" asked Carl. "I wouldn't know." He took several paces into the room, turned and paced back towards the door, each foot placed precisely. Then he stopped, swung around, and grinned. "For luck: three forward, three back. It never fails me."

"Well," said Joseph, meeting his grin, "We all must have *something* that hasn't failed us, or we wouldn't be here."

"I wish I *weren't,*" said Dermet. "I wish I'd been pushed out in the eighth section, or even the fifth."

"Oh, stuff it!" said Carl. "We're all going to make it through this one. It's just a formality. Do you know how much the Government has spent on our education by now? Do you think they'd throw it all away?"

"I hope you're right," said Joseph. "It sounds stupid, I'll admit."

CARL snorted and slapped his hand against the wall. "Does it make sense to train us this far and then 'ping!'—line some of us up against a wall, just because we didn't pass one crumby final?"

"You think it's some kind of *hoax?*" asked Dermet, his eyes opening in surprise and hope.

"Sure," said Carl. "I know it is."

Joseph shook his head and made a dubious face: "How come you know it is?"

"My whole section knows it.

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We've known it for at least six months. One of the instructors told somebody, and he passed it on." Carl seemed to enjoy the role of informant.

"Did the instructor tell *you?*" asked Dermet.

"I didn't say he did, did I? If he had, I would have said so. But I got it from the guy he told . . . if you *must* know."

"Well," said Joseph, thoughtfully putting the heel of one foot against the toe of the other, "I'll have to admit it never seemed very sensible to me to wait all these years for . . . something like this."

"It's *cruel,* if you ask me," said Dermet. "Nobody else in any of the other classes or sections has to pass anything as . . . as stupid as this. I mean either pass it or get . . . you know."

"I've already told you," said Carl angrily, "It's a *trick.* They want to see how scared you can get, and I guess you'll get honors, Blondie. And do you know what that means?"

Dermet looked uneasily at Joseph for support.

"What does it mean?"

"I wasn't asking you, but I'll tell you anyway. It means that Blondie here . . ."

"My name is *Dermet.* . . ."

"That Termite here will be sent way out into the boondocks, that's what it means. He'll end up a 4th division payee, that's what it means. They don't want chickens like *him* running the Government!"

"You take that back," said Dermet softly, but with conviction. His pale eyebrows stood out against his reddening skin.

"He was only joking, Dermet. We both know you aren't chicken, don't we Carl?"

Carl looked at his hands, rubbing a fist into his palm. "I guess so," he said reluctantly. "But why does he have to be so nervous? I told you there's nothing to worry about, for gosh sakes!" His eyes lifted and met Joseph's. They were deep blue, contrasting strangely with his olive skin.

AT that moment, through the wall at the rear of the room, they heard a volley of gun fire. The three boys froze, Joseph and Carl still staring into each other's eyes.

"You said it was a *trick!*" Screamed Dermet. "Damn you, you stupid jerk!"

Carl turned his deep eyes towards Dermet, his face darkening: "Don't talk like that to *me,* Blondie, or there won't be anything left of you to shoot."

Joseph moved nearer, so as to intercede if necessary. "He didn't mean anything, Carl, no more than you did. We're all nervous, that's all."

"Speak for yourself," said Carl, turning and pacing to the

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farthest wall. "I'm not nervous, but I sure get t'd off by guys who are."

Dermet was shaking now, and had folded his arms so as to control the tremors. "It was rifle fire, wasn't it?"

"That doesn't mean anything," said Joseph. "Even if it was, that doesn't mean you're not going to pass the test."

"I know I am," sighed Dermet, slumping down into one of the chairs and picking up a magazine which he rolled and unrolled as he talked: "I've got to be absolutely calm before an exam. Absolutely. And I've never been so scared in my life."

"Look," said Carl, "if you'll calm down a minute I'll tell you something else that this instructor said. And that was that they have a tape or something of rifle fire, even *screams*, so as to make it real. That's all that is out there, just a lot of noise."

"You're making it up," said Dermet.

"Suit yourself." Taking one of the magazines from the pile, Carl sat down and began leafing through it, looking at the pictures.

WHAT number are we on the list?" asked Dermet. For the last fifteen minutes he had been half-lying in the chair, staring up at the ceiling. He seemed to be much more in control of himself, even though the rifle fire had continued from time to time. There had even been, as Carl predicted, the sound of screaming.

"I think we're in the sixth group," said Joseph.

"It's sixth, all right," said Carl, tossing aside his magazine and stretching. "I remember exactly."

"Then we should be coming up pretty soon, wouldn't you say?"

"I guess so," said Joseph, looking at his watch. "They said the exam doesn't take very long."

"What exam?" growled Carl. "Can't you guys get *anything* through your thick heads?"

"I've been counting the times those rifles fire," said Dermet, "And you know what? I think they're shooting all of us, one by one."

"You're nuts," said Carl. "You've absolutely lost your marbles."

"There's been ten times now," Dermet continued. "That means they've shot the first three groups." Now that he had reached this point of certainty, Dermet seemed icy calm.

"Look," said Carl with heavy patience, "It's all a joke, can't you understand? The test, the rooms, the noise, everything. When it's all over, we hand in our underwear, and the guys with the best marks get sent to the boondocks, see!" He laughed and did pushups off the wall.

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"He could be right, you know," said Joseph. "It certainly doesn't make much sense to shoot us now. We've passed all the other tests."

"That's the point," said Dermet. "We didn't. We flunked once, maybe several times, already. As he said, this isn't a test, but that's because we've already failed."

"Can it," said Carl, over his shoulder. "Termite, you've got a morbid mind."

Joseph sat forward in his chair, his hands clasped tightly in front of him. "Well, we'll know soon enough, I suppose."

There was another burst of gun fire, and Dermet laughed. "There! Right on time. We're going to get it in five minute intervals. The firing started fifty-five minutes ago, almost to the second. So that leaves us about a half hour, give or take ten minutes each."

"Boy, as far as I'm concerned, they could shoot you right now," said Carl. "You are an absolute pill."

"I don't think they'd do it this way," said Joseph, still looking down at his hands.

"Why not?" asked Dermet. "Why not this way? I suppose they think it's humane or something, to give us hope like this. Maybe that's it."

"Look," said Carl, "if this was some kind of kindness routine, why would they shoot off the rifles right by our ears, huh? You tell me *that!*" He slapped the wall behind him. "It's a *joke!*"

"Don't bet any money on it," said Dermet, turning and closing his eyes. "Wake me when they come."

"It seems like a stupid thing for the Government to do," said Joseph. "I mean stage a prank like this."

"It's not exactly a prank" said said Carl. "It's an initiation." Raising a finger to his lips, he crossed the room and whispered into Joseph's ear: "Look, the place is bugged, see? They're testing our responses."

"That make sense, all right," said Joseph.

"What does?" asked Dermet, sitting up. "What're you guys whispering about?"

"You tell him," said Carl with a grin.

Joseph got up and whispered what Carl had told him, but Dermet shrugged. "We'll see," he said, looking at his watch. "We'll know for sure in about twenty-five minutes."

Once again from beyond the wall there came the muffled explosion of rifle fire and a shrill scream, woven into a frightening carpet of sounds.

JOSEPH was the last to leave the room. He followed the teacher who had come for him

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down the corridor, past many closed doors, until they came to the last, which the teacher opened, gesturing him inside with a sympathetic smile.

As Joseph entered, an official stood up and offered his hand over a desk. "My name is Charles," he said, pointing to a chair. "Won't you sit down, Joseph?"

Charles was carrot-haired and freckled, a stout, friendly-looking man in his late thirties. His grip was soft but firm, and as he seated himself, his face relaxed into an easy, open smile. There was something about him that reminded Joseph of a teacher he had liked very much when he was in the seventh section, a man who was at ease in every fiber and joint. "Before we start," Charles said, leaning back and running his hands through his red hair, "Perhaps you'd like to take a minute and unwind. You can ask me questions, if you want. Anything at all."

Joseph looked at the top of the desk in front of him. It was clean except for some typed material that Charles had piled to one side. "Well, sir," he began slowly, "I suppose there's the obvious question. . . ."

" 'Obvious' is as good word as any," said Charles, grinning and scratching his rumpled hair. "Let's have it."

"Well," said Joseph, "There were three of us in the room. . . ." He stopped and laughed nervously. "I guess you know *that* already," he said. "What I meant, was that there were three *opinions* in the room."

"That's not unusual, either," said Charles, but without a trace of sarcasm in his voice.

"Well, one of the guys said it was all a joke, that there wasn't any test at all. He said that even the . . . the firing and all was a joke, some sort of initiation. The other guy started out scared, but then he got the idea that we were *all* going to be shot. So I was just wondering, who was right? I mean, you said you'd answer. . . ."

"Yes, yes, of course," said Charles, straightening up and resting his elbows on the desk. "I'll be glad to answer that one, if you want me to. Are you sure you do?"

Joseph nodded: "Yes," he said.

"There is, of course, a third alternative," said Charles.

"That there is an exam?"

"And that some pass and some fail."

Joseph nodded. "But we've been counting the . . . the sounds," he explained, "And if that's the case, everybody has failed so far."

Charles laughed: "Which wouldn't be very likely, would it?"

"I guess not," said Joseph.

"There is, however, the possibility that they fire every five minutes—I presume you've no-

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ticed that, as well—but only execute the failures."

"That could be, I suppose," he said. "Which is it?"

Charles raised his index finger. "One more question, then I'll tell you: which do *you* think it is?"

Joseph looked up, and saw for the first time that the man's brown eyes were somehow camouflaged by his freckles. They were very hard to locate, and once located, to hold. His face was as mottled as a leopard's.

"I don't know," said Joseph after a moment of thought. "I really don't know. It could be any. It could even be all."

Charles broke into an open laugh of relief, and got up, stretching his hand out for the second time in five minutes. "Congratulations, Joseph," he said. "You did splendidly!"

"That was the test?"

"Let's say that was the *answer*." Charles stepped from behind the desk. "My best wishes for a successful career," he said. "Take my advice and get a full night's sleep. Tomorrow will seem like one long appointment, and you'll need to be well-rested."

"I'm tired enough, that's for sure," said Joseph, as the examiner ushered him toward a door at the end of the large office. "Say . . . could you tell me how the others did?"

"Others?"

"Carl and Dermet, the two boys in my room."

Grinning reluctantly, Charles shook his head. "Im afraid that's all the questions for today," he said. "But I wouldn't worry about them if I were you." He gave a friendly wink and opened the door. "A right and a left turn, and you'll be outside." He shook Joseph's hand again. "Good luck!"

"Thank you, sir," said Joseph, as the door shut behind him. The hallway was dim, and he had some trouble groping his way along, but then, as he made the final turn, there came a blaze of light so intense that he involuntarily threw up his hands to protect his eyes, and in the instant of relief provided by the shield, saw the dim forms of men drawn up in single file, facing him. In the frozen moment remaining, it occured to Joseph that his question had never really been answered, not even by this. **THE END**

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FANTASY BOOKS

By ROBERT SILVERBERG

The Dream Adventure: A Literary Anthology, *edited by Roger Caillois. 285 pages. The Orion Press, $5.95.*

This unusual book appeared in 1963 and seems to have attracted little attention at the time; I did not discover it until long after publication date, and it may be on its way out of print by now. If it is, it will be a great loss, for this is one of the finest and most stimulating anthologies of fantasy ever assembled, and it deserves a place in every fantaste's library.

Caillois is affiliated with UNESCO in Paris. He appears to be something of an authority on fantastic literature, for it was he who edited that odd Polish tale of a few years back, *The Saragossa Manuscript.* In the present volume he has ranged widely to present aspects of the dream state in literature—a potent and significant theme for an anthology, since all fantasy is in a sense a kind of waking dream.

One item in the book is from our own branch of publishing: "A Wild Surmise," by Henry Kuttner and C. L. Moore, which appeared in *Star Science Fiction* in 1953. That's the unforgettable little yarn about the man who dreams about the Quatt Wunkery. Some of the other stories will also be familiar ones to steady readers: H. G. Wells' "The Door in the Wall," Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," and Poe's "Tale of the Ragged Mountains." Curiously missing is Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," which might have been accompanied by Raymond F. Jones' related story. "The Person From Porlock."

Much of the material will be new to most fantasy readers. There is a splendid group of tiny Chinese fantasies; an extract from Apuleius and one from Marco Polo; a vignette by Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentinian whose fantastic stories merit more frequent reprinting in our field; stories by Kipling, Maugham, and Gautier; a haunting one by Vladimir Nabokov; and others by European writers scarcely known at all in this country, such as the Croatian Ksaver Sandor Gjalski. We can all suggest omissions: where is Kafka, where is Lovecraft's *Dream-Quest of Unknown Ka-*

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dath, where is—? But we must be grateful for what we have, and what we have here is a superb anthology, handsomely printed. Caillois' wide-ranging introduction is an important part of the book. No serious lover of fantasy ought to be without this.

Ghost and Horror Stories of Ambrose Bierce, *selected and introduced by E. F. Bleiler. 199 pages. Dover Books, $1.00.*

The Ambrose Bierce story in Caillois' book is here too, of course, classic that it is. Accompanying it are about two dozen other Bierce fantasies, attractively set forth in this Dover paperback.

Bierce was a newspaperman at the turn of the century, sardonic, embittered, brilliant. An extremely complex person, as is made clear by E. F. Bleiler's comprehensive, perceptive foreword, Bierce seemed to turn naturally to fantasy fiction of a mannered, "literary" style. The stories have been reprinted repeatedly, but this is the first Bierce collection in fifteen years or more, and the only one that I know of in paper covers. I would buy the book for four pages alone, the brief, powerful "An Inhabitant of Carcosa," which I find still creates chills in me after what must be a thousand readings. But there are half a dozen others that cast the same spell: "A Watcher by the Dead," "Moxon's Master," "The Middle Toe of the Right Foot." Some of the others are dated in style, excessively tricky of plot, or simply too flimsy to merit rereading. But Bleiler speaks of Bierce's "crude power and sensual drive," and the phrase is an apt one. The stories—most of them—live and breathe and throb. And frighten, too. Altogether a worthwhile addition to the shelf.

Weird Tales, *edited and with an introduction by Leo Margulies. 155 pages. Pyramid Books, 50¢.*

Once upon a time there was a magazine of weird fiction. It began in 1923—the first all-fantasy magazine ever published, reaching the newsstands three years before *Amazing Stories*—and it perished thrity-one years later. For the last decade or so of its life, *Weird Tales* was no more than a zombie imitation of its earlier glory, but at its peak, from 1928 to 1938, it maintained an incredible standard of quality. In its pages appeared the stories of H. P. Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard; C. L. Moore, Fritz Leiber, Henry Kuttner, and Robert Bloch all began their impressive literary careers there; Ray Bradbury's best fantasies saw publication there. Today, copies of *Weird Tales* command premium prices among collectors, and for good reason.

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Leo Margulies has attempted to pick just eight stories out of thousands as a *Weird Tales* sampler. Naturally, many of the time-hallowed classics have been omitted, but the result, I think, is a fair representative cross-section both of the kind of stories WT ran and of the authors who wrote them. Lovecraft and Howard are here, of course, with relatively unfamiliar stories: Howard with the non-Conan "Pigeons from Hell," Lovecraft with the brief "The Strange High House in the Mist." Neither shows the writer at his best, but both are worth a new life. Three prolific *Weird Tales* contributors of early days, all very much still with us, are included: Edmond Hamilton, August W. Derleth, and Frank Belknap Long. Long's story, "The Body-Masters," is pure science fiction (WT published a great deal of s-f) and is excellent for its day, which was 1935. Hamilton's 1934 offering, "The Man Who Returned," displays not only that veteran author's customary craftsmanship, but also the insight into mood and character that is more typical of his recent work than of his paleolithic output. Derleth's "The Drifting Snow" is concise, spooky, and effective.

Then there are two stories by writers who once represented the younger generation of WT contributors: Robert Bloch's "A Question of Etiquette" and Fritz Leiber's "Spider Mansion." The Bloch (1942) is grisly, diabolically clever, and pleasantly unpleasant, though it lacks the thumb-to-nose irreverence of many of Bloch's stories of that time. The Leiber (also 1942) is very much like the tales Leiber has been telling in FANTASTIC recently, which is to say it is a masterly revelation of the horror and strangeness underlying everyday life.

The gem of the book is a long novelet, "The Sea Witch" by Nictzin Dyalhis—a forgotten writer today, but a celebrated one in his own time. Dyalhis was, in a way, the Cordwainer Smith of thirty years ago, a man who followed his own path and produced stubbornly individual stories that provoked heated discussion. This one was among his last, and one of his best.

Rumor has it that Pyramid is planning to mine other such anthologies from the *Weird Tales* treasure-trove. Let's hope so. Hundreds of magnificent fantasies are locked up in those crumbling pages.

Golden Blood, *by Jack Williamson. 157 pages. Lancer Books, 50¢.*

Here's a *Weird Tales* item now: a serial of 1933 vintage. Williamson is best known today for his science fiction, for such classics as *The Humanoids* and *The Le-*

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gion of Space, but he began his career writing purple-prosed epics of fantasy in the A. Merritt manner, and *Golden Blood* climaxed that phase of his development.

The jacket blurb tells all: "Science and sorcery battle in a desert of mystery—and one man fights alone against odds of unimaginable evil." In short, a period piece, having to do with a "Secret Legion" of soldiers of fortune who get mixed up in sinister doings in Arabia. There's a strong Merritt influence, a dollop of Haggard, a good deal of Talbot Mundy, and the standard Williamson plot-formula, in which the odds are stacked against the hero from the start. The story doesn't make much sense, and is full of lines like "'*Kismet!*' shouted Malikar, leering triumphantly." But the imagery is lovely, the fantastic moments are appropriately soaring, and the narrative surges along with a kind of idiot energy that compels admiration. It's all good fun, and nary a dull page.

The October Country, *by Ray Bradbury. 276 pages. Ballantine Books, 50¢.*

A new edition of the 1955 collection of stories by *Weird Tales'* most successful alumnus, Ray Bradbury. There are nineteen stories in all, most of them dating from that period in the middle Forties when Bradbury was first forging a literary personality for himself. Such unforgettable items as "The Small Assassin" and "The Man Upstairs" remind us of the unique power Bradbury had before fame came to him. There is none of the sentimentality, none of the slushiness of thought, none of the slovenliness of construction that marks latter-day slick Bradbury. These are tight, hard, horrifying stories, the fantasy contemporaries of his *Martian Chronicles.* They are the stories of a young, determined, greatly talented writer who won his fame the hard way, and who probably wishes he could recapture some of the freshness and power this collection displays.

BLUE BOY, by Jack Sharkey
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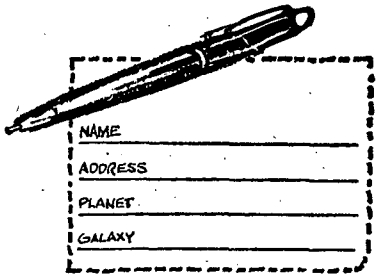

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(*Continued from page 5*)

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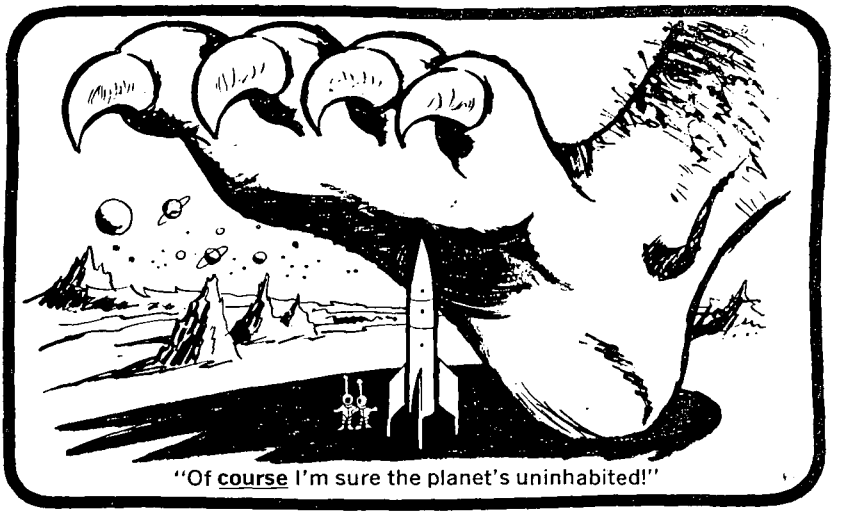

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